

“YOU NEVER KNOW WHO’S WATCHING”: HOW TECHNOLOGY IS SHAPING  
PRACTICE FOR SOCIAL SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

by

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B.S.W., Kansas State University, 1987

B.S., Kansas State University, 1987

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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Family Studies and Human Services  
College of Human Ecology

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the phenomenon of social networking sites (SNSs) and its impact on practicing human service professionals. In this exploratory study, 33 interviews, comprised of family life educators and social workers, were conducted in order to gain the perspective of how SNSs were being used in practice. A phenomenological approach was used to get at the lived experiences of these professionals. In addition, a Johari Window lens provided a way to understand the level of transparency professionals had when interacting with the digital culture.

Themes found described how SNSs were being utilized in practice. These centered on benefits to the agency, clientele, and to the professional. The changing technological climate was shown to be impacting the delivery of services, yet professionals were underutilizing SNSs in practice. Regardless if the professional was on or offline, being recognized as a professional was extremely important. As a result, professionals were cognizant of potential consequences of using SNSs for professional and personal use. This awareness not only led professionals to want to safeguard their privacy, but also provided an opportunity for these professionals to develop guidelines for ethical digital behavior.

Implications for research include exploring how a person's digital status should be defined, if at all, how do privacy and 'connecting' influence each other, and what is the impact of viewing others' posts on the ego strength of the person.

The biggest implication for practice was the need for specific policies designed around professional digital behavior. In the absence of specific guidelines, professionals established their own set of rules to guide their practice. However, as more agencies and professions begin

to see the need for and develop policies for SNS use, professionals will need to assimilate these new guidelines into their practice.

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## **Dedication**

This document is dedicated to my sister, Candi. A person, who loves her children, believes in family, no matter what the cost. You are one of the strongest people I know!

## **Chapter 1 - Literature Review**

Fewer than 20 years ago, the Internet, although commercialized to the public, was seen mainly as something used by people who were either antisocial or had an addictive personality (Kolmes, 2012). Today, the Internet is a valuable resource for home and business use and for professionals and non-professionals alike (Anderson & Guyton, 2013). Referred to as “one of the most remarkable inventions in history” (Yoon, 2011, p. 2401), the Internet is being accessed by people of all ages for intrinsic and extrinsic purposes (Shih, 2004). Leisure and entertainment, social support, information seeking and sharing, and professional activities are a few of the advantages and utilities found with Internet use (Baek, Holton, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011). Shih (2004) found evidence to support the notion that as Internet use increases, dependence for continued use is created, leading skeptics to question its utility.

The personal sector is not the only one being impacted by the ever-changing and evolving Internet. The professional sector has taken advantage of the myriad of opportunities by capitalizing on digital technology and using strategies such as marketing, fundraising, communicating with clientele, networking, and mobilizing community partners (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Shih, 2004; van Dijck, 2012). With both the personal and professional sectors accessing and utilizing the Internet, the boundaries that once divided these two segments are narrowing, and some of the private and public elements are beginning to overlap. Personal behavior or information deemed as private can no longer be assumed to remain this way (van Dijck, 2012).

### **Internet influence On Communication**

The vicissitudes of the Internet also impact communication styles and patterns (Farber, Shafron, Hamadani, Wald, & Nitzburg, 2012). Cyber technology has provided the mechanism

for communication to occur almost instantaneously and conveniently (Yoon, 2011). The manner and mode in which people communicate has changed radically and has had a profound effect on society creating a barrage of communication styles that seem to be never-ending (Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2012; van Dijck, 2012). Digital platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, or even Wikipedia allow the user to communicate daily and often, by posting photos, videos, or texting (boyd<sup>1</sup> & Ellison, 2008; van Dijck, 2012). Face-to-face or landline telephone conversations appear to be decreasing while cell phone use, texting, blogging, and tweeting have risen steadily, especially among people 25-years-old or younger (Farber et al., 2012). For the Millennial generation (persons born between 1982 and 2000), communication through technology in some form has been available throughout their lives (Cekada, 2012; Kolmes, 2012). Thus, for this generation, it stands to reason that digital communications (in general) are preferred over conventional communication methods (Hanson, Drumheller, Mallard, McKee, & Schlegel, 2011).

Jin and Park (2010) listed motivation as the number one reason digital communication is outpacing traditional face-to-face or telephone conversations. A basic fundamental need for people is the desire to belong in order to develop meaningful relationships (Maslow, 1968). This requisite or social motivation manifests itself when individuals attempt to be like others by using digital communication modes rather than traditional communication methods (Jin & Park, 2010). Social motivations, along with the functionality of the cell phone, were reported as primary reasons for its use. However, Jin and Park (2010), also included “mobility, fashion, immediacy

<sup>1</sup>At birth, given the name Danah Michele Mattas, but legally changed her name, to danah michele boyd (no capital letters).

and status” as incentives for its use (p. 612). Farber et al. (2012) and Jin and Park (2010) listed convenience, due to the ability to send and receive messages almost instantaneously, as the top reason for using texting with this generation. As the world continues to see an upsurge of Internet use (boyd & Ellison, 2008), people and businesses will look for ways to communicate face-to-face and digitally (Baek et al., 2011), including through the use of social networking sites.

### **The Purpose of My Inquiry**

There is limited research on how technology has affected the scope of practice for human service professionals and even less when the focus is on the specific use of SNSs within human services. The literature boasts several articles on how technology is being used and expanded through various media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Second Life and Instagram); yet, there is very little research on how these media platforms are being used by human service professionals when working with clients. Without guidelines or policies, the practitioner is forced into a position to make judgments on “best practices” which may not assist those involved.

The lack of literature discussing whether SNS utilization with clients is contraindicated (Anderson & Guyton, 2013) and lack of clear policies, or at best guidelines, to direct the way for professional practice regarding the use of SNSs, provides me with questions for this inquiry and helped shape the focus for this study: to investigate the impact SNSs are having on the professional practice of human service professionals and whether or not there are differences in the level of online transparency among digital and non-digital natives who are working within this arena. Finally, I want to discover whether or not there are policies in place to help guide and direct the professional practice of human service providers.

## **Social Networking Sites (SNSs)**

At a “fundamental level, social networking sites are online networks of individuals linked through personalized Internet web pages” (Brown, Robertson, & Sullivan, 2012, p. 242) and “are interconnected by a virtual stage” (Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012, p. 23). These web-based services, commonly referred to as social networking sites (SNSs), were propelled into existence in the late 1990s (boyd & Ellison, 2008) and have steadily increased in popularity since this time. Today, millions of people all over the world have integrated SNSs into their daily lives, both personally and professionally. According to the Pew Internet Research Foundation, as recently as January 2014, 74% of adults who had an online presence were accessing SNSs. This was up 7% from fall 2012 and 64% since February 2005. Although SNSs are being accessed most frequently by the millennial generation, the use by people over the age of 30 has steadily increased and the usage by persons over the age of 65 has tripled since 2009 (Brenner & Smith, 2013).

Social networking sites have multiple functions (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Developing, locating, or staying connected to friends; giving and receiving emotional support; entertainment; and information gathering and sharing are a few of the ways people are incorporating digital platforms into everyday life (Baek et al., 2011; Cain, 2011). Currently, there is a smorgasbord of SNSs from which a person can choose to join and in which he or she can participate. SNSs are designed around shared interests such as culture, education level, or political views, but may also include religious affiliations, shared hobbies, or other types of memberships and connections.

### **SNS History**

Originally, some SNSs were created as a discussion forum or a way to instantly send a message to another user. Created in 1997, SixDegrees.com, a web-based service to connect

people with each other, was the first SNS where users could create a profile, identify friends, and look for additional friends (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The combination of these three features made the site unique and provided a prototype for other SNSs. However, the site failed to find ongoing support and sustainability, despite millions of users. Not having enough online-networked friends to access was identified as the reason for its failure. Users of the site felt there was “little to do after accepting friend requests” (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 214). Although SixDegrees.com shut down after a short 3 years, it paved the way for the development of other SNSs (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Gross & Acquisti, 2005).

Ryze.com came into existence in 2001 with the hope of revolutionizing the online business sector. Friendster was developed a year later and its creators had high expectations for the dating arena. Users of these sites were networked both professionally and personally (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The demise of both sites came when Ryze.com could not generate enough users and Friendster was not equipped to deal with the technical issues created by rapid growth (boyd & Ellison, 2008). This made way for LinkedIn in 2003 to become a dominant professional SNS for recruitment and advertising, and it continues as the “largest professional matchmaker site in the world” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 207). Also created in 2003, Myspace was propelled into existence with the goal to attract individuals who were alienated from other sites. Myspace was one of the first SNSs to distinguish itself from other sites by creating an opportunity for its users to design their pages in a manner unique to them (boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Originally designed only for Harvard college students in 2004, Facebook quickly expanded its membership to the general (and eventually global) public, redefining social media and the idea of an online identity (boyd & Ellison, 2008; van Dijck, 2013). Early in the history

of social networking, online identity was often defined by the ability to create a profile that was representative of the self and by the number of connections the user had online (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The purpose of SNSs was to connect the user with friends. However, with the implementation of Facebook, those same connections developed into what van Dijck (2013) described as “connectivity” (p. 200). Today, online identity can include self-presentation (personal self) and self-promotion (professional self), using narratives and story-telling as tools for one’s online social introduction (van Dijck, 2013). Facebook’s ability to connect people, products, businesses, and ads has resulted in Facebook being the “world’s most powerful social networking service” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 200).

In 2006, two years after the inception of Facebook, Twitter debuted showcasing its ability to send mini-messages. These messages, otherwise known as micro-blogging, contain 140 or fewer characters (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). Lovejoy et al. (2012) reported Twitter as being one of the most used forms of social media when marketing, public relations, or other types of advertising are involved due to its ability to disperse information quickly.

From their inception until now, SNSs have continued to evolve in design, features, and user types. This expansion goes far beyond the United States and has extended worldwide. However, it is difficult to trace SNS trajectories overseas because of language barriers and the lack of media attention the United States gives to sites that are popular overseas (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Despite these barriers, this evolution continues to create a more refined yet varied purpose than the first original sites (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). This diversification provides people with an opportunity to connect both personally and professionally by utilizing a variety of tools to generate personal narratives for their online social network (McNeill, 2012).

## **Main Sites**

Social networking sites can be ranked in numerous ways and their rank may fluctuate based on the various ways to report popularity. Some of the more widely used measures include numbers of times the site is accessed, numbers of downloads, numbers of new members, and numbers of countries with citizens accessing the sites (Comscore, 2014; Facebook, 2013). There are a plethora of active social networking sites. Myspace, Friendster, and Facebook are credited with shaping the cultural backdrop of web-based services (boyd & Ellison, 2008). However, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are reported as the most commonly used sites (Houghton & Joinson, 2010; Kolmes, 2012; van Dijck, 2013) and they are continuing to add users. The Pew Internet Research Foundation (2014) also includes Pinterest and Instagram among the top social networking sites being used. In 2010, Facebook had 350 million active users (Facebook, 2013). As recently as March 2013, Facebook boasted that 1.11 billion users accessed the website at least monthly with 655 million users having accessed Facebook daily. Seventy-nine percent of the daily users were outside the U.S. and Canada (Facebook, 2013). Facebook reported that users have an average of 130 online friends, were connected to no fewer than 80 events, groups, or other pages and in a month's time, uploaded or posted at least 90 different times (Brown et al., 2012; Thompson & Loughheed, 2012). With the availability to upload an unlimited number of photos or videos to a Facebook page, Facebook boasts that over 10 billion photographs have been uploaded (Brown et al., 2012). The growth of technology is at times surreal; in April 2012, Facebook had 200 million active users connecting via a mobile device. Less than one year later (March 2013), Facebook (2013) reported that 751 million users were using a mobile device to instantly connect them to Facebook. Having access to a mobile device (cell phone) has also



boosted Twitter's popularity, recognizing it as the number one social networking site for advertising and marketing (Lovejoy et al, 2012).

### **Common Elements of SNSs**

While there is a plethora of SNSs available, boyd and Ellison (2008) reported the main hi-tech structure of the sites is fairly similar in three ways: (1) a profile is generated, (2) a list of other users (called *friends*) is created, and (3) the user takes advantage of viewing the friends list of other users and adding these friends to his or her own list of contacts, if desired. This structure is contained within a virtual stage (Anderson et al., 2012).

**A Profile is Generated.** Users create a public, or semi-public, profile. These profiles are usually created after the user joins the SNS, are typically personalized to include various characteristics and interests, and may include photos of the user. This profile is restricted to a "bounded system" (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211), meaning only members of that particular SNS have the potential to view this profile. Managing one's online profile can be the same as managing one's personal and professional friendships in person or face to face (Shu & Chuang, 2011). The role the person has and the setting he or she is in often determine the way a person presents him or herself, or creates an image. Sias, Pedersen, Gallagher, & Kopaneva (2012) stated that people choose their friends and usually bring some level of personal characteristics regardless of the role they are playing. A person's online professional profile is typically depicted by a résumé or curriculum vitae and talking points, much like he or she would include in a face-to-face interview. A personal or more informal profile would allow a person to portray his or her likes, dislikes, hobbies, or family composition. "Branding the self," as described by van Dijck (2013), is how a person presents him or herself to various audiences (p.203). This is the user's opportunity to describe who he or she is and how he or she would like to be seen.

Face-to-face (offline) identities, albeit professional or personal, are typically created by actions, habits, or words and can be communicated in a variety of settings. Profiles developed online are similar in that they also involve actions, habits, and words even though they are communicated very differently. Face-to-face and online profiles are different in that the online profile is posted to a singular setting; making it more difficult to differentiate between the personal and professional (van Dijck, 2013).

**The Creation of 'Friends'.** The second common element of SNSs is the connection to other users. SNSs allow users to build a list of friends who are part of the user's social network (Brown et al., 2012). These users, called *friends* or *contacts*, typically share some mutual interests and are compiled and listed in the user's profile. The term *friend* can be deceiving because the meaning of an online friend does not necessarily constitute or represent the same general definition of an offline friendship (boyd & Ellison, 2008). This difference can be explained with individual and contextual factors. Many times, offline friendships develop based on similar interests or characteristics that are valued (Sias et al., 2012). Contextually, relationships tend to exist around opportunities to interact. Different friends are utilized based on the type of situation or opportunity that presents itself (Houghton & Joinson, 2010). These opportunities may be centered on one's personal or professional life or both (Sias et al., 2012). Offline relationships also tend to have common elements such as trust and reciprocity, which vary according to the strength of the relationship. These relationships are usually regulated by managing one's boundaries. The communication expectation in these offline relationships is bidirectional; both parties exchange information (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Houghton & Joinson, 2010). Relationships have the ability to distinguish themselves by the function they serve offline. The same cannot be said for online friendships.

Often online relationships are formed after a person meets someone face-to-face and wants to continue the relationship online. Houghton and Joinson (2010) described SNSs as merging different types of relationships into one cluster and calling them “friends” (p. 74). Online *friends*’ vernacular does not delineate various aspects of the friendships such as the intimacy, function, or strength of the relationship. Communication may be bidirectional; however, it is possible within SNSs to have a unidirectional relationship, such as with Twitter (Anderson et al., 2012; boyd & Ellison, 2008). Categorizing all contacts into one category and classifying them all as “friends” means any shared online information is available to all contacts regardless of the level of friendship or function. Although some SNSs allow users the ability to delineate between close friends and acquaintances or label friends in some other fashion, many do not (Anderson, & Guyton, 2013; Gross & Acquisti, 2005; van Dijck, 2012). In fact, Gross and Acquisti (2005) went as far as to say that in many cases, the depth or level of the friendship is not identified unless the user really does not care for the so-called friend. Anderson and Guyton (2013) found in their timely research study on ethical issues surrounding online behaviors of licensed healthcare providers that over half of psychologists, social workers and physicians took steps to safe-guard their privacy settings to include only their friends. However, it is not known if the authors took steps to circumvent the friend label and delineate various levels of friendship within the friend list.

**Across the ‘Friends’ List.** Lastly, once friended on a SNS, both the user and the newly accepted friend have access to the other’s network of friends (Walther Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). This feature is a key component of SNSs. Benefits of being able to traverse across the friends list include providing the opportunity to link and bond with others. By developing connections with these friends, regardless of whether the online relationship is

weak or strong, users can strengthen their social capital. SNSs have mechanisms that allow users to publically display connections (Anderson et al., 2012).

Social searching and social browsing are two types of friend searching (Shu & Chuang, 2011). They are delineated by where the relationship originally started, online or offline. Social searching refers to a relationship that began offline, but the relationship is enhanced online. The process of developing new friendships online with the hopes the relationship will strengthen offline, is referred to as social browsing (Shu & Chuang, 2011).

### **Variations to SNSs**

Although SNSs share common elements in that they allow for a user-created profile, a “friends” list that can be shared, and the ability to connect to others within the SNS, these sites differ structurally in regards to access and visibility of a user’s webpage (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The SNS Tribe.net makes profiles visible to anyone while profiles of Facebook users are restricted to those within the network. Some SNSs control access and visibility based on whether the user has a paid account (boyd & Ellison, 2008). These sites also differ in how users may explicitly seek out other users. boyd and Ellison (2008) found that some SNSs focused on accessibility, growth, and a broad range of users; while others restricted the type and number of users allowed.

### **Human Service Professionals and SNSs**

Human service professionals are found in a multitude of diverse settings including both the private and public sectors, encompass a variety of professions (e.g., Family Support Worker, Program Analyst, Mental Health Therapist, or Extension Agent), and may intervene in a client’s life at any point along the life span (Bingle, Meyer, & Taylor, 2013; Myers-Walls, Ballard, Anderson Darling, & Myers-Bowman, 2011). The needs of the client determine whether

services are interposed as primary, secondary, or tertiary prevention strategies and which role the professional utilizes (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). However, not all helping professionals are alike. Myers-Walls and colleagues (2011) noted that, while the helping professions may be similar and even interrelated, each profession can be identified by its purpose, knowledge base, time of intervention, clientele, and the way services are rendered.

Technology use along with ever-changing Internet growth is transforming the delivery of services on- and offline. In addition, workplace and client relationships are being impacted (Sias et al., 2012). The ubiquitous growth of digital media has created communication challenges as well as unique opportunities for professionals to deliver quality services (Hughes, Bowers, Mitchell, Curtiss, & Ebata, 2012; O’Keeffe, & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

### **Cultural Shift with Communication**

The growth of social media usage has assisted in moving the digital revolution forward. People using email, blogs, wikis, and other communication tools have created a two-way interactive dialogue making Web 1.0 a thing of the past (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Kuzman, 2011). Over half of human service professionals have some form of online presence, which opens up another method of communication to use when working with clients (Anderson & Guyton, 2013). This digital public paradigm changes how communication takes place (Cain, 2011) and creates a venue for a person to become more noticeable online than merely having an offline presence, whether he or she desires this or not.

### **Changes in Practitioner-Client Communication**

Communication between a client and human service practitioner has changed, and continues to change, with more professionals utilizing social media. Sias et al. (2012) defined this transformation as noteworthy because time and space have merged. Communication can

take place anytime anywhere Internet access is available (Baker, 2008). Tamitha Price, the Executive Director of the National Association of Social Work Missouri Chapter (NASW-MO), stated, “With technology use, the professional is ‘always on.’” She explained that clients are able to use technology to access the professional at any time, night or day, if the professional has “opened or left the door open” for personal contact. Not so long ago, when a practitioner went home, unless he or she was on-call, the practitioner did not receive messages from clients until he or she was back in the office the next day (personal communication, April 27, 2012).

### **Pervasiveness of Information**

The “Martini” effect, as discussed by Baker (2008), recognizes that information can be and is “accessed anytime, anywhere and any place” (p. 3). One single word entered into a search engine creates a magnitude of potential websites to explore. While a person searching the Internet can become inundated with a plethora of generic information, the data can be very personal, and in some cases, sensitive. Uploaded data may be text-based, audio-visual, or photographic (Baker, 2008), creating a “digital dossier” (Gross & Acquisti, 2005, p. 9). The person’s level of awareness of the data or concern for its visibility is of no consequence; the file is permanent and can be accessed by a third party (Gross & Acquisti, 2005).

Making personal data accessible to others without express permission can put a person at risk. The ability to manipulate database systems with and without overt identifiers in order to gain access to a person’s identity is called “re-identification” (Gross & Acquisti, 2005, p. 8). The most common types of re-identification are through demographics, face recognition, and social security numbers. Using data linkage techniques, information can be collected and used to stalk or manipulate users or steal a person’s identity (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). When privacy settings are not monitored, or if a person is willing to share personal information, exposure to a

multitude of risks and consequences can surface such as confidentiality issues, boundary crossing, or various ethical violations (Anderson & Guyton, 2013).

A double bind is created when a professional's personal life impedes on his or her professional life. When a professional is "off-the-clock," should she be allowed to behave however she wants and not have it affect her professional image? Should one's personal life be regulated by the guidelines and policies of the profession? Regardless of the professional's opinion, reality dictates that access and use of social media does become problematic when one's personal and professional lives interfere with each other (Anderson & Guyton, 2013).

### **Privacy Issues**

Advancements in technology have led to complications surrounding privacy. The multidimensional nature of *privacy* makes it challenging to define. In the late 1960s, Westin (1967) defined *privacy* as the extent information is communicated to others; including how and when it is communicated. Altman (1975) described *privacy* as the manner by which a person allows ease of access to his personal space and how he uses territorial behaviors to regulate this process. In both definitions, the keeper of the information regulated control.

*Privacy* can now be damaged because of a person's online activity; covertly, data is being collected, amassed, and disseminated with or without the permission of the person (Houghton & Joinson, 2010). In addition, managing online privacy settings alone can prove cumbersome and often futile. Transparency is being encouraged in the development of online identity and daily activities by the SNS developers making way for marketing strategies to be implemented (Anderson et al., 2012). Exposure to personal or professional online behavior, along with the vulnerability of the security of SNSs, is posing additional risk to the user (Gross & Acquisti, 2005).

Forty percent of technology users in the general population reported feeling concerned about private information being distributed or taken without permission, and these safety concerns prevented some people from buying products over the Internet (Kuzma, 2011). However, when surveyed, these same people's "actual usage of privacy matters" was different than what they reported (p. 75). Gross and Acquisti (2005) found that users perceived the "public" benefits, despite disclosing personal information, greater than the risks (p. 10). Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, and Chamorro-Premuzic (2012) found the need for popularity, socialization, work purposes, and entertainment were reasons a person would risk having her private information unprotected.

### **Transparency**

Transparency, in the broad sense, can be defined as any information accessed by consumers about an entity, regardless of the means used to obtain this information (Zur Williams, Lehavot, & Knapp, 2009). Self-disclosure is a technique used by professionals to determine the level of transparency in the practitioner-client relationship. It is typically employed with the client's well-being in mind. Farber (2006) discussed the benefits and risks associated with self-disclosure. Shame, vulnerability, and fear of rejection were perceived as the biggest risks for clients while rapport building was seen as a benefit of self-disclosure. A professional can purposefully or unintentionally disclose personal information via verbal or non-verbal means (Gibson, 2012; Zur et al., 2009).

Self-disclosure has created controversy and challenges for individuals and professionals alike. It is neither a new concept nor one that comes with a set of specifically detailed parameters for how, when, or even what to disclose. Even though occasional self-disclosure is common with over 90% of therapists, these professionals still wrestle with the level of



transparency they should have with their clients (Gibson, 2012). Studies indicate the frequency with which a professional uses self-disclosure is based on several aspects including: the type of practice setting, the years of practice experience, the symptomology of the consumer, the professional's theoretical orientation, and the cultural context of both the professional and the client (Gibson, 2012). Farber (2006) found the transparency of the professional was based on the dynamics of the relationship and that disclosures were made using boundaries between the personal and professional selves. These boundaries are established as helping professionals integrate their own personal experiences to develop an appropriate use of self that, in turn, impacts and is used in the helping process (Baldwin & Satir, 1987; Taylor & Cheung, 2010).

The process of blending the professional (skills and knowledge) and personal selves (values and beliefs, personality, and experiences) stems from the work of Virginia Satir (Baldwin & Satir, 1987; Dewane, 2006). An integrated self requires the professional to be cognizant of how his or her own experiences may influence the client-worker interactions. Incorporating this self-awareness into the helping process, only serves to help facilitate a positive helping relationship with the client (Taylor & Cheung, 2010). However, Taylor and Cheung (2010) posed the question of whether a helping professional is more effective using an integrated self, which includes both the personal and professional experiences. Their study found participants who were taught strategies for self-discovery were more prepared to handle varied aspects of professional practice including professional burn-out than those who did not have an integrated self.

When professionals are offline, unavoidable and accidental self-disclosures transpire but are limited in how they occur. These types of disclosures are found in the professionals' daily lives. A professional's culture, personal taste, political or religious views, or her spontaneous

expressions contribute to this type of transparency (Anderson & Guyton, 2013; Zur et al., 2009). How a person dresses, decorates his office, or is noticeably ill all are examples of common disclosures. These tell the consumer something about the professional's likes or dislikes, values, opinions, etc. Consumers do not have access to these unavoidable self-disclosures when the professional is "off-the-clock," unless the consumer and professional cross paths in public.

One's culture has been shown to influence the level of self-disclosure (Farber, 2006). Generally speaking, self-disclosure is more welcomed within the European American, American Indian, and African American cultures than Mexican American or Asian cultures (Chang, Chen, Huang, & Yuan, 2012; Gibson, 2012). Besides race and ethnicity, other cultural domains influenced by the level of self-disclosure are sexual orientation, disability, health status such as HIV/AIDS, religion, and gender, to name a few. Cultural identifiers are not always apparent or visible. Sexual orientation and physical or mental health issues that might be perceived as stigmatizing are least likely to be disclosed (Gibson, 2012; Kottsieper, 2009). In her review of the research surrounding self-disclosure among lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer population, Gibson (2012) found sexual orientation appeared to be the "least common disclosure by therapists" (p. 291). Kottsieper (2009) found the lack of self-disclosure of a clinician's mental health issue only perpetuated further stigmatization of mental illness. The lack of self-disclosure sent the message that one should not disclose his or her mental health issues with the public. Yet, mental health professionals are major proponents for decreasing the shame associated with mental illnesses.

## **Digital Transparency**

Even though self-disclosure is often thought of as the purposeful sharing about one's self, many professionals are unaware of, or forget, about the accidental and unavoidable disclosure of

personal information that can occur online (Zur et al., 2009). When a professional has an online presence, regardless of whether or not he or she is at work, the opportunities for these types of disclosures increase. Transparency, intentional or not, is no longer solely managed by the professional. By virtue of the ubiquitous nature of the Internet, clients no longer view themselves under the label of client but “view themselves as informed consumers” (Zur et al., 2009, p. 25). The advancement of technology has altered the nature of transparency with clients expecting and demanding a high level of transparency from professionals. The boundaries between the personal and professional selves are blurred (Behnke, 2008; Zur et al., 2009). What used to be private now can be public in a matter of seconds.

When information changes from the private to public realm, the impact will affect the lives of the professionals (Behnke, 2008). Concerns for confidentiality and anonymity dealing with high-risk or fragile clients, documentation, Googling clients, boundary issues, and delays in response, or technology difficulties are just a few of the issues for professionals to consider with digital transparency (Reamer, 2012). Online transparency is blurring the line between the personal and professional and the private and public (Anderson & Guyton, 2013; van Dijk, 2012). If not managed with a conscientious effort, a person could find herself in court (Brown et al., 2012). Kolmes (2012) found that 70% of clients acknowledged finding information online about their therapist; however, only 28% actually discussed this in session due to feeling embarrassed or for fear of being rejected. When the professionals presented themselves as approachable, empathetic, and client centered, the therapeutic alliance was stronger had the professional not engaged with the client this way (Gibson, 2012). However, no indication of the relationship changing was given as a result of the professional having an online presence and the consumer accessing available information. Even though clients are actively seeking information

about helping professionals, there are gaps in the literature as to the impact this has on the relationship prior to, during, or following the professional relationship.

There is limited research on how a professional's culture shapes her view on self-disclosure when online; the same is true for a consumer's online presence. Despite this limited research, as the professional becomes more accustomed to using social media in her professional and personal life, the need to have a watchful eye is warranted in order to protect not only the professional's privacy, data, and usage, but the clients' as well (Anderson & Guyton, 2013).

### **Self-awareness**

In his early works, Jourard (1971) wrote about self-disclosure in the context of relationships. Self-awareness could be achieved only by disclosing to others. He said a person would share personal information only when he was a person of "goodwill" (p.5). In other words, information was shared as a result of building trust and intimacy. Gibson (2012) reported that the higher level of self-disclosure, the more likely the consumer would perceive the professional as approachable and "more real and more human" (p. 290).

The ability to think critically, understand biases and prejudices, and establish goals are essential to forming therapeutic relationships and lay the foundation for developing an awareness of self (South, 2007). Self-awareness is having the capacity to explore various aspects of one's personality, which include, but are not limited to, motivations, thought processes, feelings, values and beliefs, attitudes, and having a clear perception of these traits (South, 2007). As self-awareness increases, so does one's ability to understand another's thoughts, feelings, and actions. It also provides insight into how one's responses affect others' perceptions (Smith, 2007). Smith (2007) acknowledged that often a person's actions are motivated by feelings and emotions that come from the personal self. Increased self-awareness allows for less vulnerability in situations.

This deeper understanding of one's self provides the foresight and skill to handle situations professionally.

By identifying strengths and areas for growth, the helping professional can use this knowledge to display qualities known to characterize the helping profession such as compassion, empathy, or effective listening skills. Asking questions of how one thinks, feels, or behaves is crucial in this developmental process (Smith, 2007). Halpern (2009) said reflexive or circular questions were best to elicit new learning. These new discoveries will become a part of the helping professional's identity and eventually change his or her "world view" (p. 51). These changes do not happen overnight, but continue to progress overtime (South, 2007).

South (2007) discussed the relationship between self-awareness and "developing therapeutic relationships" (p. 8). The better a person understands herself, the more effective she will be at assisting the population served. Personal and professional boundaries are fashioned as a person develops a greater sense of self. What she will or will not take on from others also impacts the level of effectiveness and ultimately the level of professionalism. A clear understanding of self helps portray a competent and skilled professional (Smith, 2007).

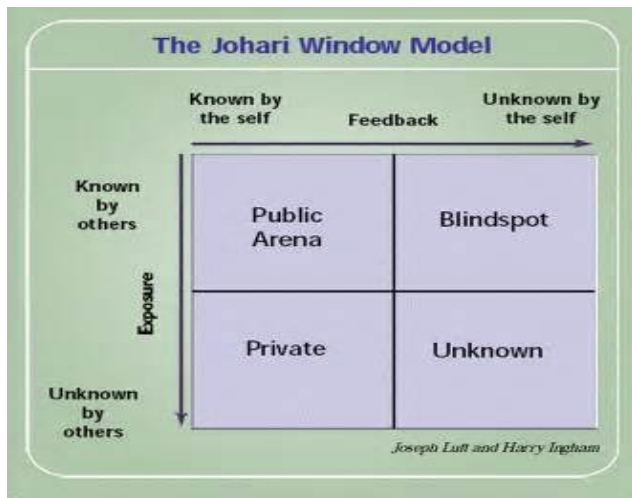
The process of becoming more self-aware can be enlightening, but it is not without possible risks. Whenever questions are asked in self-discovery progression, the answers may be difficult to acknowledge or process. New knowledge of self may come from within or from others. Smith (2007) thought that, more often than not, a person understood himself based on the perceptions of others, which may not be correct. Thus, in these times, it is even more critical to evaluate oneself based on the past, present, and future goals and determine the authenticity of the other's perceptions (Smith, 2007).

## **Johari Window**

The Johari Window is a concept that was developed in 1955 by Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham to conceptualize a person's openness (self-awareness) in relationships (Luft, 1969). This model, although simplistic in design, provides a way to understand interpersonal communication and how it is received and given (Armstrong, 2006; Galpin, 1995). The foundation of this model revolves around an individual's self-awareness, or lack thereof, and what she chooses to self-disclose to others about herself. In return, others provide feedback to bring awareness about such things as behaviors, values and beliefs, or thoughts. The individual may be cognizant about these parts of the self, however, it is possible that what is being observed has purposely been kept secret from the public, but no longer is private. It is also possible the individual might not be conscious about the behavior at all, and the feedback provides a mechanism for her to explore this newly uncovered area (Armstrong, 2006; Galpin, 1995; Smith, 2007). Awareness of oneself has been used to improve communication amongst individuals, various groups, and organizations (Galpin, 2005).

The Johari Window uses four quadrants (windows) labeled a) public (open), b) blind spot (semi-private), c) private (hidden), and d) unknown (unaware; Fig. 2.1). Each quadrant depicts the level of awareness a person has of his environment (culture) (Chang, et al., 2012). The basic premise is that the windows are small at the beginning of a relationship and expand as more information is exchanged in the relationship. The shared information may be known or unknown to the person and the transparency of the professional is based on the dynamics of the relationship and disclosures made using boundaries between the personal and professional self (Farber, 2008). Although it is often assumed a person is fully aware of how and why he interacts with others, it is not possible to have a total understanding of oneself (Verklan, 2007). The

Johari Window provides a model for determining how information is given and received based on self-awareness (Galpin, 1995).



**Figure 1.1 The Johari Window**

Quadrant one is comprised of any characteristic or features the individual has knowingly disclosed about herself in some manner. The level of trust or type of relationship will determine how much the person openly discloses (Shenton, 2007; Verklan, 2007). This arena can include such features as height, skin or hair color, clothing style, likes or dislikes, political or religious views, occupation, or even shopping preferences. How the individual shares this information will become the common denominator in this quadrant. The more the person shares, the more likely the interpersonal relationship will be mutually advantageous (Galpin, 1995; Little, 2005) and in effect, more transparent.

Unlike quadrant one, the individual has no awareness (blind spots) of what he is disclosing publically to others in quadrant two; nor, does he have an understanding of how these traits are perceived (Shenton, 2007; Verklan, 2007). Clearing one's throat when nervous, interrupting a conversation, routinely arriving late, withdrawing when confronted, or talking excitably or loudly when introduced to someone are some common examples of blind spots

(Little, 2005). Galpin (1995) said these blind spots could be detrimental to interpersonal relationships. He constructed this idea on the premise that a person's "actions, feelings and thoughts" (p. 30) could not be fully understood leading to misperceptions. Little (2005) also stated these blind spots could prevent the individual from "taking needed action (if at all)" (p. 4), which in turn could hinder personal and professional growth. When someone calls attention to a blind spot, the person gains knowledge of this new information. However, trust is a requirement if the goal is to increase self-awareness (Verklan, 2007). Disclosing the information requires trust with the hope the gesture will lead to a mutually beneficial relationship and trusting the new information will lead to personal or professional growth (Little, 2007; Verklan, 2007).

Information that is hidden or kept private from others makes up the third quadrant. This window remains as open or closed as the person so chooses. In this quadrant, information is known by the person but is purposely removed or kept secret from the public domain (Chang et al., 2012). Once the person shares something from this arena, the window becomes smaller and quadrant one enlarges (Verklan, 2007). Little (2005) labeled this quadrant as "the Façade" (p. 4) stating people do not share knowledge out of fear of how the information might be used. Galpin (1995) found withholding information only served to benefit the person and increased the likelihood of harming the relationship. Power and control have also been found to be motivators for withholding information from others (Armstrong, 2006; Galpin, 1995; Little, 2005).

Shenton (2007) expanded the Johari Window by dividing the hidden quadrant into "unexpressed needs and independently met needs" (p. 489). His basis was people do not always keep information hidden because of power and control or fear issues. Information can be kept hidden while the person is in the early development stage of receiving information from the hidden quadrant. Time is needed to formulate opinions or actions and to determine the



usefulness of the information to the relationship. In the early stages of a relationship, it is not unusual for a person to keep hidden traits, opinions, or other characteristics that, if known, might negatively impact the relationship. As trust develops, more information is shared causing this quadrant to shrink and the open quadrant to enlarge (Halpern, 2009). Regardless of the reasons a person reserves the right to withhold information, others can perceive this behavior as distrustful, can cause suspicion, and sends a faulty message (Armstrong, 2006; Verklan, 2007).

The fourth and last quadrant, is labeled “unknown or unaware” because awareness about certain thoughts, feelings, or behaviors have not been identified by the individual or others (Galpin, 1995; Verklan, 2007). Little (2005) referenced this quadrant as a “collective blind spot for everyone” (p. 4). This quadrant has the potential for the most creativity in relationships or can provide the most frustration with them (Armstrong, 2006; Galpin, 1995; Halpern, 2009). Success depends on both parties working together to learn new information (Galpin, 1995). In a qualitative study of international volunteers, Chang et al. (2012) focused specifically on this quadrant. Results showed both positive and negative characteristics that were unknown to the participants and those working with them at the beginning of the experience surfaced. For example, prior to the international volunteer experience, the volunteers were unaware of “hidden discrimination” or “selfish” behaviors (p. 241). When volunteers were placed into or experienced new situations without their normal support systems and coping strategies to draw upon, opportunities for the volunteers to look introspectively were created. Because these reactions occurred in a cross-cultural setting, the same level of insight might not have surfaced had the volunteers not had this experience overseas. Exposure to a new situation enabled the volunteers to gain insight into these unknown areas. With this new knowledge, relationships

were impacted because the volunteers were “tolerable, independent, flexible and confident” and found a greater sense of “persistence, courage and flexibility” with these contacts (p. 242).

The Johari Window describes how effective communication can occur when there is a balance between feedback and self-disclosure. Feedback includes asking questions while self-disclosure requires sharing of information (Armstrong, 2006). Openness to feedback means the new information can move to the open/public quadrant and will lend itself to more effective communication (Verklan, 2007). Increasing the public arena becomes the goal; as quadrant one increases, so does self-awareness (South, 2007). Nevertheless, some people cannot receive feedback and enable defense mechanisms that push information and the person communicating away (Verklan, 2007). Galpin (1995) reminded readers that asking questions is a critical component to effective communication on account of how messages are heard through “personal filters” (p. 31). Personal filters are developed because of a person’s life experiences. The positive or negative outcomes of these experiences impact how future messages are perceived (Chang et al., 2012; Galpin, 2005). As Smith (2007) stated, at times a helping professional may allow his or her own feelings and thoughts to obstruct the message the client is communicating, thus hindering the therapeutic relationship. Once the individual becomes more attuned to the blind spots and undiscovered areas and reveals more of the hidden window, these quadrants decrease in size (South, 2007) and give way to a transformed individual (Chang et al., 2012).

### **Intersection of the Practitioner’s Personal and Professional Self**

The helping professions have become increasingly multifaceted and diverse as families face issues such as poverty, divorce, drug and alcohol use, and mental health issues that traverse the life span. No longer do professionals solely focus on the individual and his or her area of need. Professionals are using a multi-level approach by seeking to assist and empower the

clients they serve at the micro, meso, and macro levels (Kirst-Ashman and Hull, 2012). Taylor and Cheung (2010) found the intricacy of these issues, coupled with the professional's convoluted of his or her own "internal struggles" (p. 160), have impacted the delivery of services by requiring (in many cases) a conglomeration of professionals at various system levels. The internal conflicts also are influenced by the personal and professional experiences of the practitioners. Problems can surface if a professional has not adequately merged his/her personal and professional selves. The professional self includes the education, applied learning opportunities, and skill set, while one's personality, values, beliefs, and experiences comprise the personal self (Dewane, 2006; Taylor & Cheung, 2010).

Self-awareness on the part of the professional becomes critical to the effectiveness of the helping relationship (Taylor & Cheung, 2010). However, the use of self goes beyond the simple technique of self-disclosure. It also encompasses the professional's values and beliefs, personality, relationship dynamics, and coping strategies (Dewane, 2006). Most helping professionals' education and training emphasize self-awareness, self-care, and self-exploration in order to guard against professional burnout. This knowledge base can strengthen ethical practice and assist with the development of the practitioner's skill set, all of which will lead to positive evidence-based outcomes (Taylor & Cheung, 2010).

The dilemma surfaces when social media are utilized by the personal self as an outlet for self-care, but that activity causes the professional self to encounter struggles. Social media allow people to connect to each other socially by using narratives in the form of words, photographs, or videos (van Dijck, 2013). These personal stories, if written offline, would be similar to keeping a diary or journaling; a technique often used in the helping process. When a person uses these same techniques online it is referred to as a "blog or a published conversation"

(van Dijck, 2012, p. 167). A person may receive the same cathartic benefits of sharing his or her personal accounts regardless if he or she does this on- or off-line. However, when posted online, personal information is no longer private; potentially, this can lead to a negative consequence of using SNSs for this purpose (Anderson & Guyton, 2013).

## **Digital Status**

Digital status refers to the technological ability of a person. Although controversial, most often, digital status is assigned based on a person's age (Kolmes, 2012; Ransdell, Kent, Gaillard-Kenney, & Long, 2011). Using labels to distinguish students and their learning styles from educators within the primary and secondary education system, Marc Prensky (2001) created the term "digital native" to categorize a segment of population into a cohort; people who had only lived in a world with digital technology are digital natives (p.1). He determined this to be individuals born in 1982 or later. All other persons (born prior to 1982) were placed into the non-digital native cohort (Ransdell et al., 2011). Currently, these two categories are the main labels assigned in order to denote a person's digital status. Generally speaking, these two cohort labels do not predict individual or developmental differences. However, as more research is being conducted, some general patterns have been noted between the two cohorts (Cekada, 2012; Gu, Zhu & Guo, 2013).

## **Cohort Effects**

Digital natives have lived in only a digital world; while, non-digital natives, also referred to as digital immigrants, were born prior to the digital age and may or may not incorporate digital technology into daily life (Kolmes, 2012; Prensky, 2001a; Ransdell, 2011). Many digital immigrants have "settled in" and are comfortable using various forms of digital technology

unlike “digital refugees,” a term for digital immigrants who have not embraced technology (Ransdell et al., 2011, p. 932).

Digital natives are people born during or after 1982; they are classified as the *millennial* cohort and are also referred to as *Generation Y* (Cekada, 2012; Kolmes, 2012; Ransdell et al., 2011). These individuals represent the first generation to grow up exclusively in a society influenced by digital technology (Prensky, 2001a). As first generation natives, this cohort has been christened with this title for being born after the existence of digital technology, which occurred roughly around 1982 (Kolmes, 2012). Considered to be “native speakers,” it is assumed this cohort is fluent in digital language, which includes both the Internet and computer and video game use (Prensky, 2001a, p. 1).

The status of non-digital natives is given to people born prior to the existence of digital technology. This status, loosely defined, is a broader category encompassing all other cohorts prior to 1982. Cohorts within the non-digital status are: *Generation X* (born between 1965 and 1982), *Baby-Boomers* (born 1946-1964), and the *Silent Generation* (born 1933-mid 1940’s; Cekada, 2012). Even though many non-digital natives incorporate technology use in their adult lives, it has been documented and general assumptions have been made about the overall acceptance of technology use. For example, the older the person, the less comfortable he or she is using various forms of technology in his or her daily life (Kolmes, 2012; Prensky, 2001a; Ransdell et al., 2011). Cekada (2012) reported only about 40% of Baby-Boomers access the Internet daily. According to Zickuhr (2011), approximately 72% of Boomers own a cell phone. Yet, only about 5% of this generation preferred using a cell phone rather than a landline phone as a primary mode of communication (Cekada, 2012). Almost 90% of natives used texting to

communicate; however, only 11% of non-digital natives were reported to use the cell phone to text (Cekada, 2012; Zickuhr, 2011).

Digital natives are assumed to be fluent in technology, and they outperform non-digital natives with texting, networking, gaming, and computer literacy (Zimmerman, 2012). Yet, Ransdell et al. (2011) found that non-digital cohorts, specifically people born between 1951-1962, demonstrated a greater external locus of control, were better learners, and had better critical thinking skills than digital natives. Cekada (2012) also found non-digital natives, in general, to have a strong work ethic, be practical, work independently, and develop and follow rules. However, attitude, confidence, experiences, and resistance were all listed as obstacles for this peer group in integrating digital technology for better competency (Gu et al., 2013). Besides technology fluency, natives were also able to multitask and do so rapidly. They preferred working in groups or teams, were socially focused, and preferred job flexibility with the expectation to use and have access to technology. As a result, this generation was perceived by non-digital natives to be entitled and needed coddling (Cekada, 2012; Gu et al., 2013). It should be noted that confounding factors of age and basic cohort effects might have nothing to do with technology, but these differences could be due in part to the stage of life course, cognitive development or other cohort effects.

### **Cohort Effects with Communication**

Each generation's communication patterns are influenced by its cultural, economic, and political climate, as well as other individual influences (Cekada, 2012). A person's environment shapes values, behaviors, and how he or she gives, receives, and perceives information (Cekada, 2012; Gu et al., 2013). One of the biggest differences among digital and non-digital natives is in the area of immediacy (Cekada, 2012; Williamson, Clow, Walker, & Ellis, 2011). Digital

technology has created a need for a fast-food communication diet. Opportunities abound for communication to take place instantly and just about anywhere, creating the need for an instantaneous response (Cekada, 2012). Sometimes this need for immediate responses can lead to destructive consequences (Farber et al., 2012). Car accidents (Lopresti-Goodman, Rivera, & Dressel, 2012), social anxiety, bullying, addictive behaviors, and sleep disorders all have been documented as being influenced by the increase in and exposure to digital technology (Farber et al., 2012). And, more specifically related to social media are issues with sexting, various forms of harassment, and revealing enormous amounts of personal information (Farber et al., 2012; Kolmes, 2012).

In the past, digital status was solely categorized based on age. More recently, scholars have begun to question whether a person's digital status should be defined by birth year. For example, what if poverty keeps a digital native from having access to technology? Should he or she still be called a digital native? O'Brien and Scharber (2010) noted that having the ability to be "connected does not equate with access" (p. 600). Also questioned is when a non-digital native has highly developed technology skills. Harris (2010) felt digital status should be viewed on a continuum. These thoughts suggest the possibility of redefining digital status and how a person is categorized (Harris, 2010). Gu and colleagues (2013) reported that one's digital status cannot be defined merely by age. Instead, personality, experiences, and technological access are factors to consider. Regardless, there was limited empirical data defining the social media communication differences between and within natives and non-digital natives and even less within the human services arena.

## **Human Services and Technology**

Technology has found its way into the field of human services, creating expansion and integration opportunities (Houghton & Joinson, 2010). While many businesses outside of the human service arena are utilizing information technology, the human services sector has been slow to adopt technology (Lovejoy et al., 2012; O’Looney, 2005). O’Looney (2005) listed five reasons human service agencies lagged in technology integration. First, human service agencies tend to allocate less money for new technology equipment, software, and training than other professions. Less money means fewer personnel receive the latest up-to-date training or tools than if technology utilization and training were a priority. Second, in some cases, the nature of the work is not conducive to technology use. Individuals’ and families’ needs are in constant flux and have a need for individualized services. Despite the fact that many human service agencies are networked within the communities they serve, often, these agencies function independently from one another, leading to the third reason (Feely, 2012; O’Looney, 2005): the continuum of care is compromised due to communication issues internally and externally. Fourth, the work with individuals and families is not always complete after one or two meetings. The work may span days, months, or even years and involve multiple human service agencies in the process (Feely, 2012; O’Looney, 2005). O’Looney (2005) discussed the difficulty for agencies to use information technology to “connect the dots between the different problem areas within the service cycle” (p. 9). And finally, finding the connections and locating gaps among the various issues individuals and families deal with on a daily basis is challenging and problematic; making it difficult for new policies to be developed and technology growth implemented. Thus, social service agencies’ lack of personnel and financial, technical, and software resources, coupled with



the need to identify the gaps in services and its delivery all factor into the lag in technology utilization.

### **Benefits of Technology**

Even though technology integration into human services may be slow, the expansion of technology has begun to shape how services are conducted (DeSantis, 2012; Feely, 2012). For example, telemedicine allows for both medical and mental health treatments to take place while the professionals and clients are miles away from each other. Treatment can now be prescribed in a variety of ways such as text or video-conferencing, all of which advance how professionals serve clients (Kolmes, 2012). Technological advances allow professionals to reach a broader clientele population beyond what they could do prior to the accessibility of technology.

Businesses benefit by reducing transportation costs, including employee expenses and time associated with travel. Increasing the employees' technological skills also provides human service agencies with the opportunity to invest in their employees (Kuzma, 2011). All of these examples demonstrate how the field of human services can integrate technology into practice with the goal of reducing ineffectiveness and increasing efficiency (Feely, 2012).

Feely (2012) determined that without social networking, the ability to move forward successfully with technology integration would be slowed considerably within social services. Human service professionals use social media venues to network with other professionals, develop social capital, contact consumers, provide information alerts, obtain training, market and expand their businesses by increasing the visibility and credibility of the professional, and by enlisting the media (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela 2012; Kolmes, 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Ransdell, et al., 2010). In a study focusing on the top 100 revenue producing non-profit

organizations in the United States, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) found that 73 of these organizations used social media for three main purposes: information, dialogue, and action.

Information sharing was the primary way social media venues were utilized (Lovejoy et al., 2012). Communicating with stakeholders, volunteers, or clientele was used to respond to messages, express gratitude, or solicit responses. Briones, Kuch, Liu, and Jin (2011) stated an interactive dialogue was essential for building relationships and led to an increase in trust and approval with the agencies. Of these three utilities of agency social media use, action, which included donation requests, lobbying, selling, or recruitment, was employed least often. These authors concluded that social service agencies were underutilizing social media (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Lack of staff and time, along with the reluctances of older board members who were not familiar with digital media, were listed as key obstacles for increasing agency social media utilization (Briones et al., 2011). Though underutilized, the use of SNSs has proven to be an asset in the marketing strategies of successful agencies (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

### **Risks of Technology**

Human service professionals strive to manage service delivery costs in an efficient manner. Technology, including social media use, appears to be aiding agencies in accomplishing this task (Briones et al., 2011; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). However, while many agencies have found using technology beneficial, this growth is not without some areas of concern and accessing SNSs has created problems for employers (King, Valença, Silva, Baczynski, Carvalho, & Nardi, 2013). For some agencies, the costs may outweigh the benefits of totally embracing digital technology. Computer and technology mismanagement – such as software piracy, abusing email, identify thefts and downloading pornography – have been reported as costing businesses upwards of billions of dollars each year (Haines & Leonard, 2007; Leonard &

Cronan, 2005). Workplace cyber-bullying, privacy violations, and work-place errors are just a few of the dilemmas faced within the human service arena (Cain, 2011). In some cases, employees are restricted from accessing SNSs while at work (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Cain (2011) reported that companies that allowed employees to access Facebook during work hours saw an average of “1.47% drop in productivity” (p. 1037) resulting in a significant loss of productivity, over the course of a year. As the economic climate changes, human services agencies are expecting more work from their employees and practitioners are feeling this pressure (Feely, 2012).

Speed and amplification are two enhancements of digital technology leaving their mark on human service agencies (Nielsen Ratings, 2013). Digital speed may help practitioners do their jobs more efficiently. For example, it is not necessary to leave the office to go purchase office supplies. On-line shopping with office delivery affords the practitioner to not lose production time by running errands. However, this opportunity for efficiency also may be accompanied by negative results. Thomée, Dellve, Härenstam, and Hagberg (2010) found long periods at the computer meant the person often ignored breaks to feed, rest, or hydrate the body and took away time from other activities. Practitioners who were not cognizant of or ignored their physical and emotional needs of self-care had an increased risk for burnout, weight-gain, and poor job performance (Taylor & Cheung, 2010).

Physical and mental health issues also have been documented as related to increases in technology use (King et al., 2013). Al-Sharbati (2012) stated that frequent use of technology among children and adolescents predisposed them to obesity and anti-social behaviors, unless actively prevented. Naturally, it stands to reason that as youth enter the workforce, behaviors left

untreated have the potential to impact social services agencies on multiple levels, irrespective of whether they are employees or clients.

Thomé et al. (2010) found that an overload of digital communication use (e.g., email, twitter, and chat) led to difficulty in filtering out important information. Information overload, along with the practitioner's need for constant access, can lead to distractions, which can result in workplace errors (Cain, 2011). Also, feelings of guilt stemming from the perceived pressure to respond quickly to various forms of digital communications have been associated with depression and anxiety (Dixet, Shukla, Bhagwat, Bindal, Goyal, Zaidi, & Shrivastava, 2010; King et al., 2013; Thomée et al., 2010). Nomophobia is a condition originally used to describe a person who would experience high levels of anxiety when separated from his or her cell phone. Now this condition encompasses any form of digital communications device and is expected to eventually be listed in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) (King et al., 2013).

Amplification, otherwise known as peer-to-peer marketing, enables thoughts, opinions, or comments to travel from one person to another using some form of digital technology (Nielson Ratings, 2013). In the marketing sector, amplification is not viewed as positive. This process limits economic marketing strategies, which ultimately results in less capital gain (Nielson Ratings, 2013). However, in the social media arena, amplification can be a human service professional's best friend or worst enemy. Much like the game, "*Gossip*," played as a child, information passed from one person to another often changed in meaning. This also can be the case when information is exchanged digitally. Just as word-of-mouth messages can be passed on erroneously, so can social media messages. The possibility of having a message interpreted or perceived inaccurately may increase when using digital technologies, which can lead to negative

amplification for the professional (Cain, 2011). Digital technology provides a forum for the message albeit positive or negative to be amplified and then disseminated due to the ubiquitous nature of the Internet potentially reaching far more people in the virtual world (who can form an opinion) than simple word-of mouth amplification (Anderson et al., 2012; Cain, 2011).

### **SNSs and Litigation**

Human service professionals are not the only ones using SNSs to perform their jobs. However, these professionals may not realize that when they participate on social media, they are also providing a goldmine of information for law enforcement, attorneys, and other investigators. This storehouse of digital information can be useful for attorneys as opportunities are surfacing that lead to litigation (Brown et al., 2012). Easily accessible and often public information can be used in family, criminal, and employment law cases (Brown et al., 2012).

When a professional uses any form of social media, albeit in his or her personal or professional life, a trail of evidence is left; leaving a door open for his or her integrity to be questioned. What is said, to whom, by whom, who saw it, and how long the user was online are a few of the treasures readily accessible for someone with litigious motives (Brown et al., 2012). Professional integrity is, or should be in my opinion, a value that moves the professional to act and behave according to the profession's ethical standards. One's integrity can be called into question and eventually compromised based on what is put online. For example, during a law suit, misrepresenting one's education, job skills, or employment history can provide fodder for an attorney.

Kuzma (2011) described lawsuits that have been filed as a result of breach of privacy; however, the difficulty lies in whether a person can or should be held liable for personal

information shared on SNSs. Who is responsible for determining what “realistic privacy expectations” should be (Kuzma, 2011, p. 77) when personal information is shared readily?

### **Maintaining Professionalism Online**

Professionalism may be as difficult to explain as it is to learn (Osman, Wardle & Caesar, 2012). Thompson et al. (2008) reported it was difficult to teach and measure accurately professional skills for future professionals in the classroom. Professional skills are a combination of necessary skills needed to perform the job plus interpersonal skills. Collier (2012) asserted that many of the professional skills needed for the future professional, go far beyond the classroom setting or a set knowledge base; therein lies the difficulty with developing professionalism offline. Professionalism also involves the skills needed to connect to others and is best modeled through mentoring (Collier, 2012). If teaching new professionals about the professional world is difficult at best, how much more problematic is it to develop professional skills utilizing an online venue? Thompson et al. discovered in their study of medical students, teaching professional skills was important. However, these students felt ill prepared and had difficulty connecting the potential consequences of online sharing of personal information to professional behavior. Teaching social media professionalism is one facet of the new digital age that is lacking in the literature, despite the fact there are trepidations associated with online professional behaviors (Collier, 2012). In a survey given to medical students about online professionalism, some students felt that while in class, the school could regulate their behavior both on and offline; however, once the day ended, they did not want the school or the medical profession dictating their off and online activity (Collier, 2012).

It is not uncommon for professionals to have membership in professional organizations such as National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), American Psychological Association

(APA), or National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Members often sign a statement vowing to uphold the organization's code of ethics. However, many of the organizations have failed to establish specific guidelines or policies for social media use for their membership despite many examples of individuals being reported to these organizations. Boundary blurring, breaching confidentiality, inappropriate self-disclosure, or multiple relationships were some of the more common pitfalls found for professionals to avoid when using social media (Anderson & Guyton, 2013).

APA recently published a policy related to social media and the development of public forums. While APA provided a strong statement about privacy regarding the use of social media sites and membership, it addressed the sites created by APA and not those of the individual members or social media (APA, 2012). In 2005, NASW published standards of technology use. To date, these standards have not been updated to include various forms of social media, but do refer to the social worker's responsibility to stay current on various technology forms and practices (NASW, 2005). NCFR adopted its most current set of principles and ethical guidelines for family scientist in 1998 (NCFR, 2013). Specific criteria for online use are not found in these guidelines.

Despite the lack of concrete professional social media guidelines, Anderson and Guyton (2013) found the expectation amongst professional organizations was for members to revert to the profession's code of ethics, specifically the ethical principles, to guide their behavior. An example of this expectation can be found in the NCFR's Family Life Educators Code of Ethics. This code did not specifically identify technology or online use despite the fact the code is specific to the responsibilities the certified family life educator has to individuals, families, colleagues, communities, and the profession. There is a lack of guidance for how to navigate

SNSs professionally. In order to support individuals and families, the professional must be willing to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge needed for these families (NCFR, 2013). A conscientious professional who might be unclear as to appropriate digital practice behaviors, such as boundaries or having a professional online presence, will utilize the profession's guiding principles to generalize these core values to his or her professional practice.

### **Professional Online Presence**

Helping professionals have been utilizing various communication technologies to work with individuals and families since the 1990's. They have cited easier access to their clients and greater flexibility as the major reasons for the surge in online professional practices (Mishna et al., 2012). Having an online presence increases a professional's visibility (Anderson & Guyton, 2013). Anderson and Guyton (2013) reported an increase in the number of consumers who are seeking online services in the areas of medical and mental health. These authors go on to mention that of the majority of adults in the United States have gone online to seek out some type of medical information. Nonetheless, there is risk when a professional decides to have an online presence (Kuzma, 2011). She needs to ask whether the benefits outweigh the risks.

### **Online Impressions**

A person's overall reputation can be affected by his or her online presence (Baker, 2008). Perceptions formed online have similar features to those shaped offline. Both have the ability to provide information directly and indirectly. When using technology, such as texting, email, twitter, or online chat, a person can control and regulate what he or she is saying or doing. Yet, when using a SNS, the user may be at the mercy of the behavior of someone else. However, technology advancement allows static information to be excavated from fields that might have



been thought to be obsolete. In addition, many SNSs offer interactive and static features allowing other people to post additional information to the user's site (Walther et al., 2008).

Walther et al. (2008) found that an observer's perception can be influenced positively or negatively regardless of whether the information was provided by the profile user or not. Profile users were rated more positively in social and task attractiveness and credibility if posts were positive in nature and photos or videos posted depicted attractive "friends." Conversely, negative comments or comments that contained grammatical errors or profanity were found to decrease the credibility, social attractiveness, and ability to complete tasks. This was especially the case if the profile user was a female. However, male profile users were seen more favorably leading the authors to conclude the interaction effect of gender included a "sexual double standard" (p. 45).

Zwier, Araujo, Boukes, and Willemsen (2011) found the level of social connectedness perceptions related to hoped-for and real self were similar if the user had a profile picture that included others and had a high number of friends. However, if the number of friends listed were excessive, the social connectedness perception weakened, leaving the impression the profile user was not actually as connected as he or she indicated.

### **Personal and Professional Boundaries**

Boundaries encourage the development of margins and measures by which a person discloses personal and professional information to another individual or group. In an offline relationship, the amount of personal information shared typically is based on how each person defines his or her relationships with the other person. This is a matter of perception, and it is possible the parties involved will view the nature of their relationship similarly or differently from the other person. The more intimate the relationship, the deeper, more private, and more personal the information that is shared (Houghton & Joinson, 2010). In this type of relationship,

the information shared is expected to remain privy to only those persons involved. However, online relationships are harder to define and management of the margins of these relationships is more difficult.

### **Reputation of the Helping Professional**

Using digital technology in practice creates apprehensions for helping professionals. Two major concerns for business executives were the possible repercussions from release of confidential information and the negative posts to a social media site by a disgruntled employee (Kuzma, 2011). The concept of six degrees of separation fuels the potential for negative posts to reach persons not intended to see such content. In 1929, Frigyes Karinthy, a Hungarian playwright and author, has been credited as the originator of the idea that any two people in the world could be connected in some fashion in a matter of six steps (Shu & Chuang, 2011). Pool and Kochen (1978) and Milgram (1967) further tested this concept utilizing offline relationships, and found that any two people could be connected to each other by no more than three or four degrees of separation (Shu & Chuang, 2011). If a person offline can be connected to someone else offline simply by four other people, it stands to reason with the advent of SNSs that at least the same is true for online relationships. Negative comments posted following a challenging day at work quite possibly could be seen or relayed to unsuspected employer, co-worker, or client.

### **Technology and Social Networking Policies Within Social Service Agencies**

Kuzma (2011) analyzed 60 online SNSs from around the world and found that 92% of these sites had some type of privacy policy that listed how information was held and disseminated. However, privacy policies were not necessarily readily accessible to the public for fear the average user would not sign up for the social network. Of the SNSs that had privacy policies, only 45% of users actually read them prior to setting up an account (Kuzma, 2011).

SNSs are not the only entities that should be monitoring online activity in order to develop effective policies. Social service agencies need to be doing this as well. The ever-changing climate of digital media has made it nearly impossible for agencies to keep pace with new technological advancements, not to mention keeping pace with policy development or revisions (Brennan, 2013). The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2006) found that only about 22% of employers had policies governing their employees' online presence. In 2010, the number had risen to 27%. Desai, Hart, & Richards (2009) challenged agencies to develop policies revolving around email and Internet etiquette in order to ward off legal concerns. Confidentiality, misuse, and privacy issues along with the agency's right to monitor emails were just a few of the concerns leading to trepidation. Brown et al. (2012) discussed similar types of legal issues involving social media. These authors noted the agency's administrator was not the only one monitoring the employee's online presence, but others outside the agency as well.

Brennan (2013) stated that the professional has an ethical and professional obligation to stay up-to-date on technological advancements, including a review of ethical guidelines, the latest research with various forms of technology, and best practices. Ahern and Mechling (2013) echoed this by adding the necessity to keep updated on the latest technology and social media trends, recognizing this data will aid professionals in assessing client needs.

To be proactive, organizations need to be aware of how the Internet has and is motivating workforce changes while making a concerted effort for a strategic plan of information management, which includes the people managing the information (Baker, 2008; King et al., 2013). Kind, Greysen, and Chretien (2011) recognized that awareness involves not only employees but the clientele as well. Agencies have an obligation to have a working knowledge of their clients' access and utilization of SNSs. Baker (2008) said it best: "The real challenge in

technology management is the people not the technology” (p. 9). This suggests that the issue is a personnel concern. As the Executive Director for NASW-MO and ethics consultant to the chapter’s membership, Tamitha Price is reminded daily of the pitfalls the surge of technology use and ease of accessibility are posing. When it comes to policy, she encourages agencies to act quickly in developing and implementing standards for the protection of their employees and clientele (personal communication, April 27, 2012). Without guidelines or policies, the practitioner is forced into a position to make judgments that may or may not benefit those involved. Desai et al. (2009) also emphasized the need for policies to be developed for agencies to shelter themselves from litigation. Written policies that involve frontline employee input (Galpin, 1995) and are dispersed to all employees are ideal and offer the best outcome for compliance (Desai et al., 2009).

### **Summary**

Human service workers are committed to working with families in order to support and encourage families to live healthy and productive lives. The growth of the Internet is providing opportunities for technology utilization within the helping arena. And yet, there is limited research on how technology has affected the scope of practice for these professionals and even less when the focus is on the specific use of social media. Social media has become its own culture; albeit, digital. Its growth has brought about a blurring of relationships (Shu & Chuang, 2011). A feature of SNSs is the ability to connect a person to anyone who is willing to share a “friendship” with the user. This interconnectivity has resulted in issues surrounding digital transparency (Houghton & Joinson, 2010), especially for the helping professional. Professionals, who have worked to blend the personal and professional selves, can use their self-awareness when face-to-face with clients to positively affect the helping relationship and assist in

maintaining professional boundaries (Baldwin & Satir, 1987; Dewane, 2006; Taylor & Cheung, 2010). However, there is a gap in the literature on whether this same level of professionalism is and should be maintained when using SNSs.

Social media can lead to boundary blurring. Professional identity is no longer defined only by the work he or she conducts solely off-line, but rather there is an obscuring of the personal with the professional self, thus, creating a potentially new identity for the professional when he or she is online (Thompson et al., 2008). Who defines social media rules for this person who can access SNSs as a professional or as a person on his or her own personal time? Is there or should there be a difference? When a professional utilizes social media, regardless of whether it is at work or on one's personal time, what is being disclosed about one's personal and professional lives? Is there a level of awareness to what is being posted? What is the professional's understanding of the human service agency's policies on utilizing social media whether at work or at home?

The Johari Window provides a model to understand the level of transparency these human service professionals have when interacting within this (digital) culture (Chang et al., 2012). Up till now, no researchers have used the Johari Window to assess the professional's level of self-awareness around online transparency and how human service professionals provide feedback in order to bring awareness on varying levels of transparency. Furthermore, the lack of literature discussing clear policies, or at best guidelines, that help professionals maneuver through professional practice regarding the use of social media, provides questions for this inquiry.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to gain information-rich data by using a phenomenological approach to understanding the impact of SNSs on professional practice and applying the Johari Window concepts to assess professionals' level of transparency when using SNSs. Investigating the lived experience will assist me in gaining an understanding of what is an acceptable level of digital transparency and whether or not there are policies in place to direct professionals' work with clients.

The over-arching research question for the current study was, "How are SNSs shaping practice for human service professionals?" I had three specific research questions (RQs):

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How are human service professionals using SNSs in practice?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: How do human service professionals see SNSs as impacting how they work with clients?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: What strategies are being employed to help guide professional practice?

## **Chapter 2 - Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study's focus was on how Social Networking Sites (SNSs) impact the field of human services and whether or not there were differences in the delivery of services among human service professionals. With the advancement of technology, more people have had opportunities to use various forms of technology, both personally and professionally. Consequently, this exploratory study used a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experience of human service professionals' understanding and usage of SNSs (Patton, 2002).

### **Primary Purpose**

The desired goal for this study was to provide information that would prove useful to those working in the fields of human services. Applied research involves taking the results of a study and making them applicable to the real world (Patton, 2002), in this case, the human service arena. Due to the ubiquitous nature of technology, these findings will be applicable in professional settings by assisting in policy development, benefitting the professional and the agency. Brennan (2013) commented about how difficult it is for agencies to keep pace with technological advancements. It stands to reason that the same would be true for professional development as well. My intent is for these findings to be used to educate professionals on the perceived benefits and potential pitfalls for ethical SNS use in practice.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Methodology**

The purpose of this inquiry was to examine how SNSs are shaping practice for human service professionals. Qualitative methodology allowed a better avenue to explore this topic than quantitative methodology. In essence, data were gathered at a deeper level and with more detail than quantitative methods would have facilitated; providing in-depth insight into the

phenomenon (Verhoeven, 2011). Patton (2002) stated that qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to give a voice to the experiences of the participants in great detail.

Qualitative methodology permitted me to be a part of the story. Patton (2002) discussed how qualitative researchers are continually assessing and paying attention to what is happening with themselves, the participants, and the readers; a process done by using reflexive triangulation. During this study, I had to be mindful of my own beliefs and ideas surrounding what Patton (2002) described as “reflexive screens” (p. 66). These screens include such things as culture, political age, gender, social status, and education. Being attentive to not only my own beliefs and perspectives of these screens, but to those being interviewed and to potential readers, was vital to the study.

Finally, qualitative methodology allowed me to study this phenomenon without any preconceived ideas of the impact of SNSs on professional practice. Because the goal was to gather data about this relatively new topic from those who have experienced it directly, I was able to ask specific and detailed questions in order to explore this phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

### **Approach**

This study used a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology considers how the individual’s (human service professional) experiences of the phenomenon (use of SNSs) are used for meaning (Patton, 2002). Babbie (2011) described a key component of phenomenology by stating, “People describe their world not ‘as it is’ but ‘as they make sense of it’” (p. 325). In this perspective, there is a desire to make sense out of the professionals’ understanding or perception of what has happened to them, their lived experiences. Regarding SNSs, my purpose was to listen to the lived experiences to investigate the meanings these professionals ascribed to the



phenomenon and gain an understanding of the interface between SNSs and transparency of the professionals (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenology focuses on the past. The past can be recent or distant depending on the lived experience being explored (Patton, 2002). When using phenomenology, it is important for the researcher to experience (as much as possible) the phenomenon that is being studied. Therefore, phenomenology uses in-depth interviews, conducted in the “field” (Verhoeven, 2011, p. 30) as a method to determine what meaning the participants attach to the experience. Verhoeven (2011) referred to this process as “holism” (p. 30), a process where the participant’s meaning of the experience is not seen as separate but part of the “whole system” (p. 30). Finally, a phenomenological approach provided a rich opportunity to get at the lived experience by asking questions that were specific and detailed (Patton, 2002).

### **Interpretive Phenomenology as a Philosophy and as an Approach**

Phenomenology is a complex word and when used, can mean a philosophy, an approach, or even a methodology. Husserl has been recognized as the father of phenomenology, however, Heidegger along with Maustakas, van Manen, and others have been credited with varying philosophy underpinnings for understanding phenomenology (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). Cohen and Omery (1994) stated phenomenology identified three main schools of thought along with the originator of the approach: descriptive (Husserl), interpretive, (Heidegger), and a combination of both (van Manen). However, at its core, phenomenology is the desire to explicate from the phenomenon being studied and entails being mindful of what is going on around us and in an environment as natural as possible (Cohen & Omery, 1994; Dowling & Cooney, 2012) or to use phenomenological language, “to get at the lived experience” (Dowling

& Cooney, 2012, p. 22). Determining which philosophy is utilized determines the methodology of the inquiry.

Since the origination of phenomenology, many researchers have expanded, extrapolated, or even combined any one of the three main schools of thoughts. For the purposes of this inquiry, my overarching research question, along with my specific research questions, provided the fodder for choosing the interpretive phenomenological approach and methodology.

### **Rationale for Interpretative Phenomenology Methodology**

Unlike descriptive phenomenology, where the primary outcome is to discover the common characteristics of the phenomenon in general, interpretative phenomenology seeks to discover the common characteristics of the individual (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy & Sixmith, 2013). The purpose of my research questions was to describe, understand, and find meaning about the phenomenon being studied through the eyes of the human services professional, which is the purpose of interpretive phenomenology methodology. My research questions focused on discovering how human service professionals make sense of the impact of SNSs on practice. The methodology provided a mechanism for me to take an active and personal role in the process, recognizing the importance of self-reflection to explore for researcher bias (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The phenomenon was described expressively keeping in mind the cultural climate (Brenner, 1994; Cohen & Omery, 1994). This methodology allowed me to explore the phenomenon using lines of inquiry to explore how SNSs are having either positive or negative effects on practice (Brenner, 1994).

### **Focus of study**

The research regarding the impact of technology and the use of SNSs within the human services arena has been limited, thus, the decision to use breadth as the focus of this study was

made. The focus on breadth led to the need for a larger number of participants who shared a “narrow range of experiences,” as compared to fewer participants resulting in more in-depth interviews (Patton, 2002, p. 227; Russell & Gregory, 2003). Breadth also allowed for purposeful sampling from a variety of professionals within the human service arena. These different viewpoints assisted in gaining information-rich views and meanings of the inquiry. Lastly, breadth allowed a level of generalizability of the data.

### **Participants**

Selecting participants was a key component to the data collection process. It was through the observations and interviews of the participants that information about the phenomenon was discovered (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Participants were selected based on the purpose of the study, which was to see how human service professionals were utilizing SNSs in practice (Patton, 2002; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

### **Unit of Analysis**

Because the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how human service professionals were utilizing SNSs in practice and whether or not there were differences with utilization between digital and non-digital natives, my unit of analysis was groups. Professionals of all ages and with varying types of degrees make up the human service arena. Two sub-groups of professionals found within the human services sector are Certified Family Life Educators (CFLEs) and Social Workers (BSWs or MSWs). These professionals are person-centered and have a vested interest in the healthy functioning of families. Assessing the client’s needs and determining whether primary (prior to), secondary (during), and tertiary (after) prevention strategies were utilized, the professional draws from his or her profession’s purpose, knowledge base, and skill set in order to render services (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Using these two sub-

groups of professionals as the unit of analysis allowed me to generate information about these groups and their use of SNSs.

### **Purposeful Sampling**

Sampling strategies are not mutually exclusive. For the purpose of this study, I used what Patton (2002) described as mixed purposeful sampling. Criterion, homogenous, and stratified sampling were chosen based on their functions of providing an opportunity to gain information-rich data for this study (Given, 2008).

The human service arena encompasses a vast array of degreed and non-degreed personnel who work in a variety of positions and settings, making it difficult to categorize all human service professionals as homogeneous. However, classifying the degreed personnel who are either family life educators or social workers into two separate homogeneous groups, allowed the opportunity to explore these sub-groups in more depth (Patton, 2002). The focus of the study was breadth. Homogeneous sampling strategies created opportunities to discover variations within the participants' perspectives, while looking for common patterns and themes of SNS use within these two sub-groups. These characteristics helped shed light on the use of SNS phenomenon in human services, by family life educators and social workers. Homogeneous sampling produced information-rich results that were both unique to the particular participant and could have shared meanings within the family life education and social work populations (Patton, 2002). It also provided me with an avenue for collecting the data by using in-depth interviews, taking into consideration that individual differences could not be ignored.

Criterion sampling involves identifying the characteristics each participant must possess in order to be included in the study (Patton, 2002). For the purpose of this study, the sample had

to meet the following criteria: be employed in a human service agency, have a professional degree, and be either a Certified Family Life Educator or a Licensed Social Worker.

Being currently employed within some type of social service agency was a crucial criterion for this study. Human service professionals interact with clients at various points along a time continuum of prior to, during, or after something problematic occurs (Guerney & Guerney, 1981). Myers-Walls et al. (2011) referred to these strategic points of prevention as primary, secondary, and tertiary as a place to intervene. In order to get at data pertinent to the purpose of the study, it was necessary to select participants whose daily responsibilities functioned primarily within at least one of these prevention categories, creating the criterion of being currently employed.

Within the professional disciplines of family life education and social work, certain educational requirements must be achieved in order to receive either a bachelor or master's degree and to become certified or licensed. The educational curriculum lays a theoretical foundation and provides learning opportunities for the development of a profession's specific skill set. In addition, there is emphasis on conducting oneself in accordance to the profession's code of ethics (Anderson & Guyton, 2013). Education, skill set, and adherence to a code of ethics allowed me to classify CFLEs and LSWs as professionals. Because the literature was scarce on how SNS use was impacting these two professional groups, utilizing these "experts" aided in the exploratory phase of this research (Given, 2008).

Finally, using stratified sampling strategies, CFLEs and licensed social workers were stratified into two subgroups: digital status and degree level. Digital status was stratified into digital natives (born in 1982 or later) or non-digital native (born prior to 1982) subgroups. Likewise, degree level was stratified into either bachelor or master's degree. Cases were

selected using the matrix (Table 2.1) found below. Purposeful sampling assisted in choosing human service professionals representative of degree level and digital status criteria, with the goal of identifying two CFLEs and social workers per category.

**Table 2.1 Stratified purposeful sampling using the digital status and degree level of the professional.**

Human Service Professional		Digital Status			
		Digital Native		Non-Digital Native	
		CFLE	Social Worker	CFLE	Social Worker
Degree Level	Bachelor				
	Master				

### **Data Collection**

The fieldwork design offered me with an opportunity to define my role, the setting, data sources, and documentation strategies for the study. This design began with determining my role as an observer, using a fully structured open-ended questionnaire to select participants, and ended by being a participant interviewer, as interviews were conducted. Using an emic perspective allowed the data to speak for itself. I offered full disclosure to the participants as to the purpose of the study.

### **Survey Instrument**

Prior to the collection of data, permission was secured from the Kansas State University’s Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (IRB). In order to identify potential participants, I sent out an email solicitation (Appendix A) via two listservs. The first listserv is maintained by the National Council on Family Relations and included approximately 1,347 certified family life educators.

I also utilized a listserv for social workers located in northwest Missouri and northeast Kansas that includes persons who have a BSW, MSW, or a LCSW. I maintain this listserv (as the

BSW Field Coordinator), and it is housed within the Criminal Justice/Legal Studies and Social Work Department at Missouri Western State University (MWSU). Currently, there are approximately 230 members.

Responses received from the listserv were screened using the criteria describe above. The pre-interview screening survey was conducted via a telephone interview if at all possible. This survey served two purposes: as a mechanism for selecting participants for an in-depth interview and to determine if SNSs were being accessed by the professional for personal and professional use. The survey consisted of two main questions with sub-questions for the purpose of identifying persons who meet the criteria for the study. It allowed me to select participants based on a combination of their degree level and digital status, in order to obtain a stratified sample for each category as previously indicated in Table 2.1.

Using the contact information from the email responses, I contacted each respondent. Upon contact, the pre-screening questions were asked. If the potential participant met the criteria of a particular category (e.g., digital native, CFLE, and master's degree), he or she was added to the matrix. This continued until there was a minimum of three participants for each of the eight categories. Recruiting efforts netted 14 social workers and 19 family life educators meeting the sampling requirements for a total of 33 interviews.

### **Participants' Demographics**

**Social workers.** Social workers recruited worked in a variety of agencies which included: child welfare agencies, Veterans Administration, hospices, counseling agency, hospitals (medical and psychiatric) and a nursing home. Places of employment for this group were primarily located in northeast Kansas or northwest Missouri. The range of years in fieldwork experience ranged from six months to thirty years.

**Family life educators.** Family life educators recruited worked in the following areas: Cooperative Extension, alcohol and drug facility, Department of Health and Senior Services, YWCA, higher education, community mental health agencies, school districts, children's initiatives, self-employed, and churches. Fifteen states and one Canadian Providence were represented. The years of field services ranged from eight months to over thirty years.

### **In-Depth Interviews**

Once a participant was selected and agreed to be interviewed, an interview time was set. Interviews took place at the participant's agency, MWSU, a neutral site based on the request of the participant, by video conferencing using Skype or Zoom, or by conference call. Prior to the beginning of the interview, the participant was informed of his or her rights and was asked to sign a consent form. The interview was conducted using an interview guide that included an outline of key topics, sensitizing concepts, and questions to be used for each interview. This type of approach offered me the flexibility to follow the lead of the participants regarding the depth of a topic or as new concepts emerged (Patton, 2002). (See the interview guide in Appendix C.)

Data were collected from these interviews via audio/visual technology and by note taking. At the minimum, I used a digital audio recorder and my iPhone, which was equipped with an audio voice recorder designed for mobile phones as a backup method. All of these methods for recording the interviews had the capability to import the dialogue directly to a computer so it could be transcribed it using the software Express Scribe. I, along with professional transcribers, transcribed the interviews verbatim into Microsoft Word.

I participated fully as an observer. Verbal and non-verbal interactions were observed allowing me to note any inconsistencies between the verbal and non-verbal responses. In



addition, a collection of observations of the interview environment, any documents received, such as any agency's social networking policies, and my reactions were noted (Patton, 2002).

### **Analysis Plan**

Qualitative analyses were expected to include several steps and to happen in phases: unraveling, coding, and constructing and by using deductive and inductive analyses (Patton, 2002; Verhoeven, 2011). Savin-Baden and Major (2013) described qualitative analysis as an ongoing process that does not begin *only after* the data are collected. These authors argue the analysis begins when a researcher starts collecting data via the literature review, making decisions about the study's design, and even as interview questions are being constructed. A phenomenological approach was used to help guide all phases of the analysis process.

When using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyze the data collected from the participants' interviews, the researcher cannot be passive in the process. IPA recognizes and requires the researcher's role to be dynamic by attempting to see the phenomenon from the perspective of the participant "through a process of interpretative activity" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53). Smith and Osborn (2008) described this process as twofold. First, participants ascribe meaning to the phenomenon, and secondly, the researcher is tasked with making sense of the meanings the participants attributed to the phenomenon. This process is not necessarily concerned with the frequency of meanings, but more about truly understanding the meaning in context (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

At its core, qualitative data analysis is about finding themes. Its purpose is to describe and make sense out of the phenomenon being studied. Themes are exposed during the literature review process, the data collection phase, and after the data have been collected (Ryan &

Bernard, 2003). Ryan and Bernard (2003) stated themes also come from a priori approach of the researcher's knowledge and personal experiences with the phenomenon.

In order to analyze the data, my research questions functioned as a lens in order to identify themes and patterns specific to this inquiry. Themes and patterns functioned as answers to the questions being asked about experiences of the human service professionals and their use of SNSs. These not only assisted me in recognizing key themes and patterns of the phenomenon (essential to the purpose of the study), but like a road map, kept me from straying off course in a direction not conducive for my purpose.

Initially, the data for each case summary was read and reread, through the lens of my research questions, highlighting key phrases and making notes in the margins. Ryan and Bernard (2003) referred to this process as "pawing" the data (p. 88). These notes included my thoughts, summaries, connections, or ideas I saw as noteworthy or worth exploring further or that appeared to be repetitive throughout the case summary. Next, it was necessary to go back to those initial notes and look for themes, however, not ignoring the original text. I went back and forth looking for meanings or expressions, which allowed me to look for segments of the text or initial thoughts that could be condensed into a term that held some meaning (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Verhoeven, 2011). This process continued throughout the entire transcript and no one particular point was allowed to be treated as more important than another (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As these meanings emerged, they were used as a framework to refine the coding process.

Patton (2002) stressed the importance of developing a system for identifying the patterns, themes, or categories. During convergence, the next phase, I took the data and looked for interconnections that were referred to as "recurring regularities" (p. 465). These formed patterns that were examined for similarities and differences. I looked for connections between the themes

and patterns. Inductive analysis occurred because the data guided this process (Patton, 2002). My goal for this phase was to determine if I could connect emerging themes and group them together, what Smith and Osborn (2008) referred to as “clustering of themes” (p. 72). These same authors stated the importance of making sure the clustered themes did not deter from the context the participants intended. Not all themes clustered together, but those themes that did were secondary themes and could still be used (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

The next phase involved giving “structure to the findings” (Verhoeven, 2011, p. 293). Smith and Osborn (2008) suggested that the clustered themes be organized with the prominent themes listed and secondary themes listed below the appropriate clustered theme. I developed a system that allowed me to recall and access the part of the text quickly (e.g., page and line number of the theme found). Exemplars demonstrating the various themes and patterns were highlighted. I also created a system that allowed for easy access to locate in the transcripts the themes and patterns each quote was exemplifying (Brenner, 1994). This process was completed with every participant’s interview transcript. I had the option to conduct each individual analysis using the already emerged clustered and secondary themes or the option to treat each individual analysis as it was the very first (Benner, 1994; Smith & Osborn, 2008). This process allowed me to identify similar themes and patterns already established but also allowed for the emergence of new themes and patterns.

The final part of the analysis involved combining all of the findings and constructing a master list. As themes and patterns emerged out of the data and were coded, the task became whether or not the findings could be constructed to create some type of visual such as a table, matrix, or conceptual guide (Patton, 2002).

## **Researcher as Measurement Tool**

I would be remiss if I did not mention my own role as the measurement tool by being cognizant of what I brought to this study from my experiences. My interest in this topic stemmed from my past work experiences as a parent/child educator and a licensed clinical social worker, and most recently as the BSW Field Coordinator/Assistant Professor at a Division II University in Missouri. I hold bachelor degrees in Human Development and Family Studies and Social Work, a Master of Social Work, and am licensed in both Kansas (LSCSW) and Missouri (LCSW). In addition, I worked in nonprofit agencies for over 20 years before coming to academia. I am frequently confronted, both in and out of the classroom, with various technology issues surfacing among human service professionals.

### **Reflexivity**

Besides my work experience, I brought to this inquiry a blend of life experiences and my own values. It is necessary to recognize this to be aware of my own biases and expectations during this inquiry. My age and years of service in the field had the potential to affect how I heard and perceived incoming data. When I entered the “field,” computers were just gaining popularity and cell phones were something seen only in movies. Encyclopedias and using the card catalogue at the local library were how information was found. Diagnosing a client was done face-to-face and usually in an office setting. Today, assessing, diagnosing, and treating clients can be done several ways including using various forms of technology.

Recognizing the impact of reflexivity ultimately could have influenced the inquiry’s design and methodology and ultimately influenced the analysis (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This influence could have been seen within the participant’s answers. For example, if the participant felt he or she was being judged by the answers given, it was possible he or she would

be hesitant to answer honestly. Reflexivity influences could be covert, such as how a question is asked, or even overtly such as a gasp or facial gesture. Regardless, as a researcher, I needed to be cognizant of the “socio-cultural context” (Yardley, 2008, p. 247) and prepare for how I would ask and respond to questions. In the vein of being transparent to my readers, my experiences have shown if given a chance, many professionals will often rationalize behaviors that are questionable, resulting in blurred ethical boundaries. However, I realized as a professional, this might apply to me as well, but how I prepared for these possibilities by using consultation and supervision would be essential, so the participants would feel safe to share their experiences.

In order to deal with potential bias or influences, it was important for me to use consultation and supervision regularly with my major professors and colleagues. When meeting with these supports, I would bring notes from my interviews to discuss. As discussed previously, many professions have some type of code of ethics, which provides principles to guide the profession. It is within these guidelines, where the professional is directed to act and conduct themselves ethically and professionally. Ethical practice not only involves the professionals themselves, but involves how they treat those they come in contact with daily (NASW, 2008; NCFR, 2012).

Boyd (2007) acknowledged the benefits of using consultation and supervision by stating this process allows for alternative viewpoints and an exchange of ideas to be shared and discussed by the parties involved. Through these “social exchanges” (p. 204) new meanings could be created, making me a more conscientious and ethical researcher. Consultation and supervision provided a mechanism whereby I could allow myself to be held accountable to the methods of inquiry and in a safe and constructive environment.

I frequently tried to assess what was going on with me as I experienced some type of situation. I thought about what this experience meant and did it make sense in the context of other similar experiences. I asked these same questions of others as well. I was interested in knowing how I impacted others or whether or not we were experiencing similar effects and how he or she defined the experience. All of these questions were explored using a qualitative methodology.

My assessment skills could be seen as a strength or a weakness to this inquiry. Because of these skills, I was aware that I had the potential to influence participants. I was also cognizant that I could interpret, perceive, or read something into the data that might not be there, based on my own experience filters. This is true for every researcher and I was no exception; I needed to check myself regularly. A skill I managed to frequently use was the ability to change “hats.” I, like many others, function in many different roles, often, and every day. I needed to make a concerted effort to take off the therapist’s or educator’s hat and put on the researcher’s hat; keeping it on during this inquiry.

I utilized a variety of mechanisms throughout this process. As data were collected and reviewed, I kept notes of my own thoughts and feelings with this process. During my regularly scheduled meetings with Dr. Myers-Bowman and Dr. Markham, any concerns were shared. At any time, either one of these faculty advisors was able to review any interview transcripts or recordings to make sure I was conducting the interviews appropriately. I also had access to other faculty at Missouri Western State University who were willing to assist me in identifying any potential biases or influences.

## **Ensuring Quality Research**

One of the unique aspects of qualitative research is the ability of the researcher to “define and operationalize the quality of the study” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 470). This is usually based on the philosophical viewpoint or the approach and sometimes the researcher herself (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). My purpose, data collection, and analyses were interrelated and found to be credible, thus the following will provide sources to support that this study is of high quality.

### **Methods Triangulation**

Transferability was the goal of this study; therefore, the focus of this study was on breadth. Transferability refers to having the ability to apply the results outside of the study (Pearson, Parkin, & Coomber, 2011). The data collection methods allowed me to get at the experiences of a larger number of people than if this study’s focus had been depth. By gathering information-rich data, I had to be cognizant that in-depth data potentially could be compromised. Using the interviews and observations of the participants plus any written agency’s policies contributed to the quality of the study by providing additional collection methods (Patton, 2002; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Methodological triangulation helped bring credibility to the analysis in this research study (Patton, 2002).

### **Analysis Triangulation**

Logical analysis technique allowed for themes and patterns to emerge inductively (Patton, 2002). A conscious effort was made to be aware of personal biases or expectations, and to not force something to emerge that might not otherwise have emerged during this process was essential. The analyst triangulation method was used as a way for credibility to be strengthened (Patton, 2002). Using this procedure, a colleague from MWSU, Dr. Geraldine Dickey, and my

faculty advisors, Dr. Karen Myers-Bowman and Dr. Melinda Markham, assisted in this process; providing more than one pair of eyes for analyzing the data. My colleague was chosen because she is a social worker, has completed qualitative research projects, and also knows me both professionally and personally. Her main role was to provide feedback about the patterns and themes emerging and make sure I remained neutral during the analysis and interpretation of the data. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) referred to this as “confirmability” strengthening the quality of the study (p. 475). My faculty advisors were utilized differently based on their expertise in the area of qualitative research, as CFLEs, and their role as instructors and major professors on this project. Integrity of the study was their overall purpose in this project. However, assisting me in the process of coding, bracketing, and pattern and theme identification also occurred.

### **Negative Case Analysis**

Another way that I ensured quality research is through the process of negative case analysis. In this process, along with finding emerging themes and patterns, I looked for those cases that contradicted my findings (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). For example, some studies have found some general patterns among the digital and non-digital cohorts (Cekada, 2012; Gu, et al., 2013). However, technology is changing and being modified at a rapid pace (Hughes, Bowers, Mitchell, Curtiss, & Ebata, 2012; O’Keeffe, & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). As a researcher, I needed to be aware that human service professionals will have varying experiences and exposure with technology use in their professional and personal lives, which may be different than what was found in the literature. Patton (2002) indicated that a humble researcher is one who is willing to acknowledge that perhaps there are other explanations to the phenomenon than what was originally thought.



## **Determining Significance**

Patton (2002) provided three factors in determining the substantive significance of an inquiry. The first two factors come from the researcher and the participants, while the third one is based on how others think, feel, or perceive, what has been discovered. The researcher needs to ask questions about the importance of the study and whether or not it is significant or benefits others. Asking these questions will help get at these answers; lending a hand in determining the substantive significance. The answers to these questions can be subjective, based on the values, opinions, and judgments of others; it is the hope that I, along with the participants and the readers, will agree and have “consensual validation of the substantive significance” (Patton, 2002, p. 467). Even if this does not occur, the past experiences of others while using similar strategies and techniques to conduct and complete fieldwork provides reassurance.

## **Chapter 3 - Results**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how human service professionals, specifically family life educators and social workers, were using SNSs in practice and the impact of such use in the field of human services. It was expected that the personal and professional SNS experiences would provide useful information to those working in the human services arena. Using interpretative phenomenology methodology, the data obtained sought to describe, understand, and find meaning to the phenomenon from the “eyes” of the human services professional. Major themes identified centered on how SNSs were being used and how they were shaping practice for delivery of services. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant identifying their profession, digital status, degree and interview number (e.g. CFLE-NDN-M-1)

### **Research Questions**

A literature review on SNS use demonstrated a lack of empirical evidence with how it was impacting human service professionals. What follows are the three research questions used to frame and guide this study along with the findings. Exemplars will be used to illustrate the themes discovered among the lived experiences of the participants.

#### **Research Question 1: How are human service professionals using SNSs in practice?**

Professionals were using SNSs in a plethora of ways. Agencies were beginning to reap the benefit from incorporating SNSs into the workforce. Professionals found these sites to be extremely advantageous when connecting to other professionals. Online networking opened up venues that might not otherwise be possible. Finally, SNSs provided opportunities for professionals to be identified and were seen as bringing credibility to the work the professional did.

**Theme 1: SNSs are being used to benefit the agency.** There were two primary advantages that participants reported their agencies as receiving: communication and employee management.

**Communication.** Agencies were found to use SNSs as a means to market and communicate a variety of agency information. Advertising upcoming events and general agency information, posting pictures of agency events, and securing funding were some of the ways agencies were using SNSs as a marketing tool.

*I know that the VA, we do have our own Facebook site that kind of post things that are going on, if we have any upcoming events they like to post them there just to keep everyone updated as to what's going on at the VA. So that's how they use it. (LMSW-DN-1)*

Facebook and Twitter were reported as the SNSs used most when an agency wanted to market its agency and the services online. A few of the participants reported their agencies actively used SNSs to recruit volunteers, clients, foster families, or other participants. Having the ability to use SNSs as an organizing tool was another method of communication. The ability to connect and converse with the masses allowed agencies online planning and organization of upcoming events such as youth groups, camps, and conferences. This family life educator shares how Facebook is used as she works with youth:

*We in particular are using Facebook. We have 87 congregations in the state of Michigan that are connected and our senior high kids once a month attend another congregation and spend the weekend. I just help to get my kids there, but they use Facebook as an organizing tool. (CFLE-NDN-B-1)*

Family life educators and social workers felt the ability to network inside and outside of the agency was a significant benefit for the agency. Being able to connect to other professionals, funders, community stakeholders, and even clients allowed them the opportunity to nurture these professional relationships.

*It's a good way to keep up with people. I made a lot of connections just because ... I think before that high use of Facebook, for example, I had no idea what acquaintances did for a living. Even recently, I have contracted with two people professionally that are my friends personally. Because I keep up with them on my personal Facebook, I've been able to see what they do for a living as they share their careers and things and opening businesses and whatnot. I enjoy that, like I enjoy knowing people in a different capacity than if you were without that. I think your social circle is so much larger than without a social networking site. (CFLE-NDN-M-5)*

Online networking was seen as a mechanism that allowed professionals to create partnerships and to collaborate with other organizations. These partnerships allowed for the sharing of ideas, information, and other resources needed to do their jobs more effectively. In addition, the benefit for the agency was that it allowed the professionals to obtain visible recognition about the profession, bringing credibility back to the agency. For this social worker, it was a mechanism for future employment opportunities: *“That's kind of nice just to stay connected for potential opportunities in the future”* (LMSW-DN-3).

**Employee Management.** Accessing SNSs while at work was done primarily via a cell phone or an agency computer, regardless of whether this was for professional or personal use. This remained the same whether or not there was a current policy in place for the use of SNSs. For social workers, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter were the primary sites being accessed for

personal use while at work. The majority of social workers reported only checking these sites on their breaks or over lunch. Social workers reported spending very little time using SNSs for professional use. Family life educators reported using Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, but they also included Pinterest, Instagram, WordPress, and Snapchat for both personal and professional use. Family life educators were found to access and utilize these sites more frequently for professional use than social workers.

Whether real or perceived, the majority of the participants felt that if their place of employment wanted to, they could ‘creep’ on them with their personal and professional SNS use. To ‘creep’ or ‘creeping’ was an indigenous concept found in the data. In essence, to ‘creep’ meant to persistently monitor or stalk someone online in order to see what was happening with that person. While only a few family life educators and social workers reported knowing for certain their employers were monitoring their SNS use, the majority of professionals still were cognizant of this possibility as seen with this family life educator:

*I keep my social networking sites very clean and very tidy because, even though it is probably not likely, even an employer is looking at my social networking site, it is possible. I mean, my current supervisor, we were friends before and she became my supervisor. She is on my Facebook and so I'm always very consciously minded about what goes out there because of what might get back to someone. (CFLE-DN-B-4)*

While not found to be an official hiring requirement for the social work participants, a few family life educators reported their agencies required new employees to be proficient in the use of SNSs. Moreover, it was discovered for both populations that agencies were providing either in-service training or sending their employees for training on managing one’s online privacy. One social work participant reported his/her agency has had to keep an attorney on

retainer to help manage any legal issues associated with SNS use for its employees or clients. Another agency hired a person to monitor SNS use of the agency's employees and its clients. Because of the ubiquitous nature of technology, this has created challenges for agencies in the management of their employees, as described by this social worker:

*It's a big issue and it's a big legal issue and a big risk management issue. It's mostly, secretarial staff and our techs out at our detox unit. They will say very profane things about the agency that gets put out there. They will openly bash their supervisors, their co-workers, administration. So when we have those issues we have to address them. And typically anytime we have to address a post that's out there from one of our employees, it's a call to our lawyer who is 350 bucks an hour because there are some pretty fine rules. And it's always new because social media law is a really new area as it relates to employment law. And so there is always something new coming down the pipes and the national labor relations board has a lot coming down here routinely on social media. (MSW-NDN-5)*

Agencies were primarily using SNSs for communication and managing their employees. However, it was not uncommon to hear a participant remark during the interview that the agency was not taking advantage of the utility of SNSs. *"We aren't using it very much and I think that's our fault. We don't know really how to utilize it. We are working on that, but at this point I don't think we're very good at it"* (CFLE-NDN-M-1). These comments came from both digital and non-digital native family life educators and social workers who felt SNSs were being underutilized within the agencies.

**Theme 2: SNSs are being used to benefit the people served.** Not only were agencies benefiting from SNS use, but the clientele benefited as well. It was revealed that human service

professionals were utilizing SNSs in their work focused primarily around the delivery of services to and for the populations served.

***Delivery of Services.*** Professionals reported using SNSs to locate, share, or connect people served to a plethora of, both informal and formal supports. The professionals accessed SNSs to locate or obtain information about a given resource and then they provided that information to the client or linked the person to the specific information. One participant spoke about using SNSs to help military families transition from one base to another while another participant used it to develop an informal network of supports for the foster children in placement.

***SNSs as an educational tool.*** Professionals felt SNSs were a great tool when it came to educating the masses on a field related topic. Regardless of whether the focus was on parenting, mental health awareness, or educating around social justice, SNSs were employed frequently. However, it was highly important that the information was accurate and grounded in research. This was especially true for family life educators as seen in this statement: *“I only try to put out some [articles] that has been proven with research to be effective in our field. If it's just pop, there's no research-based foundation behind it, I won't post it”* (CFLE-DN-B-1). This social worker discussed why educating via SNSs was important for her:

*When people put misinformation out, I think the only way you can combat misinformation is spread accurate information. I feel like, as a person, I can sit and be mad because people are saying these hurtful things about people that I know and work with. Or I can try to start to debunk some of those longstanding myths with people.*

(MSW-DN-5)

This family life educator felt the urgency to disseminate information:

*We're [Cooperative Extension] using it as a delivery tool to get this information that we have into the hands of the general public. That's our mandate, to get research into the hands of our agents. We're using social media as a delivery tool to meet that mandate. (CFLE-DN-B-1)*

Again, Facebook and Twitter were the two main SNSs being utilized to educate the public. This family life educator stated, *"All of our projects have their own Facebook and Twitter page, that's a must with people. I would say now people see it as very, very important"* (CFLE-DN-B-3).

Being able to make an impact locally, nationally, and or internationally was empowering as seen in this statement from a family life educator: *"I like how many people I'm able to reach. I have people from 20 different countries overseas receiving my information. Seeing that I'm making a difference worldwide is something I really enjoy about what I do using social networks"* (CFLE-DN-B-1).

Another form of education was to coach people about the need for responsible digital behavior. Professionals reported doing this either on an individual basis or in a formal training setting. Modeling responsible digital behavior was an important factor for them. These encounters also provided an opportunity to discuss boundaries and the image the person wanted to convey online.

***Using SNSs to 'connect' with clients.*** Having the ability to communicate or 'connect' with clients was another central feature for using SNSs in practice. For some agencies, being able to solicit client feedback in order to nurture the client/agency relationship was essential. Once feedback was received, regardless of whether it was positive or negative, one agency responded to the client, not online but via a written note, thanking them for his or her feedback.



Professionals stated that having the ability to connect to clients online provided a public venue to distribute information about upcoming events, various topics, or other public relations type materials. Connecting for the purposes of disseminating information was a primary function of SNSs.

Some professionals did use SNSs to connect with both current and former clients directly. They felt it was important to be able to see how clients were functioning on and off services. Others used it to keep in contact with clients who had moved away:

*Most of the time I don't friend active [current] clients. It's generally after adoptions they will reach out to me, or I've had a few foster parents who are also military families. They'll get deployed elsewhere, and they want to maintain that contact, just so that they can make sure that it is easier access for them. If they have questions when they're fostering in their future deployments, they can reach out to me easier. (LBSW-NDN-3)*

Of those professionals who did use SNSs with clients, private messaging features were usually used. Connecting to clients online provided the professional with the ability to converse instantly and from anywhere. This family life educator liked this ability:

*I feel like it gives me a better connection with the people I'm supposed to interact with. I'm at home today and you could feel really guilty about that, but I feel like I just still can have a connection if I go on Facebook and they've been posting. (CFLE-NDN-B-1)*

It also creates opportunities to build professional/client relationships. One family life educator stated, “A lot of stuff starts on, or is initiated on, or in some other part of the process of, social

*networking that does enhance the face-to-face relationship”* (CFLE-NDN-B-2). Thus, SNSs are able to create a venue by which to start a relationship online that will continue off-line.

***Using SNSs to ‘creep’ on clients.*** Lastly, professionals admitted to using SNSs to ‘creep’ on their clients. Depending on the privacy settings of the clients, professionals were able to gather information from the client’s posts in order to understand how the client was using SNSs, gain an understanding of the potential barriers and pitfalls to using SNSs with clients, and to hold clients accountable.

Being able to ‘creep’ on clients online allowed professionals a chance to see if there was congruency between the online client and the face-to-face client. Social workers mentioned ‘creeping’ on clients more so than family life educators. ‘Creeping’ was done by monitoring posts, pictures, and other online SNS activities, which provided the professionals with a snapshot into the personal lives of those they served. One particular agency was reported as not allowing its workers to document the information obtained about clients online. However, the workers could use the information to direct the next encounter with the client: *“I mean, we can benefit, like I said, if a client said something about the night before, we can drop a UA [urine analysis] on them or something like that”* (LBSW-DN-3).

Being able to get a glimpse of the clientele allowed the professional to see potential problems, not only in the client’s life, but for potential future problems for both clients and professionals. A family life educator said it best:

*Social networking sites are just part of the larger picture. This is much larger than just these many social networking sites. This is about monitoring your reputation and a profile online and even typing things into the search bar is something that I think we should be aware of because it can affect you in the future... I probably sound like an*

*apparently crazy person but I just don't think we've seen yet the negative consequences of the internet and social networking and over sharing and it will come back... It will.*

(CFLE-DN-B-3)

It should be noted that even though professionals did engage in 'creeping' on clients, a majority of the professionals perceived this activity as a way to benefit the client. It brought issues to light that could be addressed in the face-to-face setting. One social worker stated, "*You can see what's going on at school, what's going on at home, and things that they wouldn't tell us in a therapy session*" (MSW-NDN-5). Being able to use SNSs in practice allowed the workers the ability to take a peek into the client's personal life. Having the ability to look at a client's online activity created opportunities for the professionals to target specific issues and problems; thus exposing secrets.

**Theme 3: SNSs are being used to benefit the profession/self.** Professionals found advantages for themselves surrounding the use of SNSs in practice. Being able to identify oneself as a professional, meeting the demands of the job, and for self-care were three findings discovered from the interviews.

***Identifying as a professional.*** For the professionals, it was important for them to be recognized as professionals. Building a brand was one way this family life educator felt this could be accomplished:

*I'm trying to build a brand around that [professional] image, around my Twitter handle and my blog. I was recently able to secure some grant funding, too, based on my blog to give it this face lift and to make it a more professional resource.* (CFLE-NDN-M-

5)

Marketing oneself was also a critical component to being identified as an expert. This was done by putting a current resume on LinkedIn or touting one's credentials along with field topics as seen by this family life educator:

*I tend to put, with my degree, and my credentials, I tend to put more information out there that has to do with the field. I think it lends a little bit more credibility to, when I say something about parenting or marriage relationships; I think it gives me a little bit more credibility when I post that information, rather than somebody who doesn't have that background. If they say something about marriage, it doesn't have the same impact as what I say does, because I have that educational background. (CFLE-DN-B-1)*

Modeling professional behavior both on and offline was essential for these professionals; even to the point they created their own guidelines for responsible ethical digital behavior.

Being a person of integrity was seen as a valuable attribute of the profession:

*It comes from a personal desire to have integrity, to be a persona thought of with integrity. And you can't have it both ways. You know you can't be on there acting like a fool, and then expect to be, you know, you can't do that, you can't flip flop. You either gotta be one or the other. (LCSW-NDN-4)*

**Accountability for professionals.** Guidelines that helped the professionals monitor their digital behavior were reported as coming from their background, education, personal experience, or the severity of the posts. Not only did they create guidelines for monitoring their digital behavior, but these professionals created their own guidelines for holding other professionals accountable for online behavior. It should be noted, while all participants interviewed created guidelines for appropriate digital behavior, not all stated they would intervene if they happened to see an inappropriate post or picture by another professional. Some stated they would alert a

supervisor, while a few stated it was not their place to confront another professional. Whether to confront or not really boiled down to the type of relationship the professional had with the other person as seen in these two exemplars from family life educators:

*Yeah, I'm a very direct, outspoken person. If we have a well enough face-to-face relationship, yeah, we can be friends, Twitter, or Facebook, or Linked, I feel like it's my duty to let you know, "Hey, this is not okay, be thankful."(CFLE-DN-M-4)*

*I never have and I never would. It happens all the time with few of my colleagues and I just really don't find it my place. I think that that's for their friends to tell them and honestly I would never tell them that I judge them for it. I've never said anything. I have the opportunity because I've seen it and I've kind of been like, "Oh my gosh," but I've never ... I've never said anything. I don't know if that's right or wrong. (CFLE-DN-B-3)*

By and large, of those professionals who would confront another professional's online digital behavior, most stated they would do this either by sending the person a private message to their inbox, call them, or tell them face-to-face. No one indicated he or she would confront the professional in a public forum online.

**Using the Johari Window.** Examining inappropriate digital behavior provided the opportunity to utilize the Johari Window. When it came to inappropriate digital behavior for some professionals, the severity or future consequences were not in their awareness. This is illustrated in this exemplar of a non-digital native social worker confronting a digital native social worker:

*There was a social worker who I worked with actually at the high school. She liked to party. She ended up there [online in pictures] all the time with whatever this drink was and looking really...well you know. I messaged her box, and I said, "You might*

*want to be careful of this one because I don't know." She messaged me back. She said, "I didn't think about that. You're right." **It just really was not in her awareness** [Emphasis added]. (LCSW-DND-3)*

Prior to this encounter, the younger social worker was not aware her personal actions, albeit while she was “off-the-clock,” had the potential to impact the opinions of others who saw the pictures. Using the Johari Window, her behavior was in the “blind spot.” It was known to others (the non-digital social worker), but the young social worker did not recognize this. It was not in her awareness. When the seasoned social worker brought this to the younger professional’s attention by providing feedback, she became cognizant of the fact her behaviors potentially could have consequences. This new awareness moved this out of her blind spot and into the public (open) domain.

Being recognized as an expert in the field was highly important for these professionals. Both family life educators and social workers acknowledged that being a part of a profession came with a high standard of accountability.

***Meeting the demands of the job.*** Locating resources or information, networking with other professionals or organizations, and taking part in professional development went into weighing the costs and benefits of using SNSs for meeting the demands of the job.

Professionals reported finding SNSs helpful in order to uncover research and locate resources for their clientele. Often, this was done by networking with other professionals or professional organizations. While both family life educators and social workers used SNSs to pinpoint resources and materials to accomplish their jobs more efficiently, some differences between the two were observed. Social workers were more likely to use SNSs to hunt down community services in order to help their clientele. Family life educators were more likely to

access SNSs to obtain solid research on various topics that could then be disseminated to their clientele. Professionals from both disciplines perceived networking as critical to being successful at their jobs.

As more and more professionals are using SNSs in their personal and professional lives, the need for on-going professional development was found also identified. One participant remarked, “*I participated in a webinar on digital ethics this morning, right before I video-conferenced with you*” (CFLE-DN-M-3). The purpose of professional development was to educate and train professionals on SNSs, but the professional took this information and transferred it to his or her work with clientele. This is demonstrated below with a statement from a family life educator:

*I think the longer people have been in the field, the more resistant they are to change. Myself, I'm a fairly young professional. We have conducted, myself and other specialists, trainings on using social media within family life education capacities because our older agents ... and I use 'older' very relative ... it's just very nervous to approach change, so that we can increase their self-efficacy in using social media and make them more comfortable with its use.* (CFLE-NDN-M-5)

SNSs helped compliment the professional’s ability to meet the needs of the job. However, it did not replace off-line tasks such as making phone calls or meeting with people face-to-face.

**Self-care.** Professionals noted that they used to help them practice self-care. Many acknowledged using SNSs during the workday to “take a break from reality.” They found this to be a good stress reliever. Some would play a quick game such as Candy Crush or Words with Friends, while others would check Facebook or Pinterest. This was usually done by using their cell phones, but some admitted to using the agency’s computers to escape. No particular time of

day was found where SNSs were being accessed for social workers or family life educators alike, to take their “breaks from reality.” For some, it was when they had down time, for others it was over lunch and then for some, it was first thing in the morning. One family life educator stated, “*If I get a 15-minute break at work, I will just scroll through my Facebook and see what is going on*” (CFLE-DN-B-4).

For some professionals, being able to vent about the events of the day was perceived as helpful for self-care. Those who used the SNSs forum were quick to say they did not post clients’ names and tried to keep any personal clientele identifiers from these posts. As noted, using SNSs in practice for the professional helped not only to be more efficient at the job, but they also lent themselves to creating the need for a more responsible digital professional. Even though its use had some practical applications, using SNSs in practice was not without impact.

**Research Question 2: How do human service professionals see SNSs as impacting how they work with clients?**

There were four major themes found surrounding the effects SNSs had on professional practice. Impact was seen in the delivery of services and awareness that digital behavior had potential consequences. Both of these themes impacted how the professionals responded by setting up safeguards for managing their personal safety and by creating individualized professional netiquette.

**Theme 1: The impact to services and how they are delivered.** Whether human services professionals used SNSs with clients often, occasionally, or not at all, they perceived SNSs as impacting their work with the clientele.



***Change is ever on the horizon.*** Admitting and acknowledging that “change is here” and the need for agencies to embrace these new technologies rather than fight or ignore them was mentioned frequently. For some professionals, the thought of learning something new seemed like a daunting task. However, as seen with this family life educator, being teachable was half the challenge:

*Just realizing that you don't have to be an expert, that you can try. That it is okay to have a learning curve, but once ... for example, I've not used them, now I have, and it was super. That the more willing you are to try, the bigger your online repertoire is, the more easily you are to adapt to new technologies and to incorporate them into your work.*  
(CFLE-NDN-M-2)

Yet for others, learning something new was simply perceived as being too time consuming:

*I was a little bit resistant getting into blogging and also honestly, rather resistant to getting into social networking media, just from a time standpoint, when they first came on board But it was one of those things that, as they proved to be really effective and really being able to serve people, I've kind of grudgingly brought myself into the new millennium and learned what I needed to learn.* (CFLE-NDN-B-3)

It was not uncommon to find both digital and non-digital natives feeling the pressure to use SNSs. One family life educator stated, “*Now it almost seems like **you're not legitimate** [emphasis added] if you don't have a Facebook, Twitter, whatever page. It's becoming a necessity*” (CFLE-DN-B-3). Many professionals admitted to signing up for SNSs due to pressure, perceived or real, even though they did not actively use the SNSs after setting up the account. This family life educator stated:

*I have a Twitter account, and I'm not quite sure why I have one. I don't use it. I had gone to a conference once, and they had said that if you were teaching students, you needed to get on there, and see basically what they were saying about you. I honestly don't want to know. I did sign up for it, but I don't really use it, because honestly I don't really want to know what my students have to say about me -- not in that setting, I guess.*  
(CFLE-DN-M-2)

One CFLE reported feeling pressured by her agency to utilize SNSs more as seen in this statement:

*They are being heavily pushed on us. As we are restructuring our state-wide Extension efforts and our county-level Extension agents, specialists like myself, instead of delivering through agents like traditional format, we are being encouraged to go directly to the public and connect to them and use online to assist in that process.* (CFLE-DND-M-5)

Recognizing the digital revolution presence in human services also meant these professionals had to recognize these new technologies were not static, but ever-changing. This proved difficult for non-digital natives but even digital natives struggled to keep current. One native remarked, *“I still find that it is really hard sometimes to keep everything up-to-date and they are constantly changing. And so it is obvious, staying one step ahead to make sure that in that change, did something else change?”* (CFLE-DN-B-4). Thus, the impact for professionals meant that in order to stay ahead of the game, or parallel at best, meant they were going to have to work hard at keeping abreast of changes for SNS use.

Acknowledging and recognizing the utility of SNSs was present for a majority of professionals, regardless if they were using these sites or not. Benefits to using SNSs in practice were reported both inside and outside the agency.

***The utility of ‘connection.’*** “Connecting” was a prevalent utility theme mentioned by almost all the participants. Besides connecting directly with clients, intra- and inter-agency connections were occurring using SNSs. Since there are no tangible borders for the Internet, professionals were able to network locally, statewide, nationwide, and internationally. Professionals connected to share and obtain information, develop or enhance relationships and partnerships, model appropriate digital behavior, market the agency and/or the professional, conduct trainings, and locate resources; all to benefit the clientele served. SNSs acted as a tool to disseminate information quickly and to the masses. However, the difficulty reported was not in getting people to connect but in how to maintain that level of involvement. One family life educator stated, “*We are getting them to connect, but how can we really engage with them to keep them interested in hearing information and getting resources?*” (CFLE-NDN-M-5).

Just like many professionals, clients were also using SNSs to ‘connect with’ family and friends for support. The perception from both social workers and family life educators were their younger clientele were the ones accessing SNSs more frequently. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat were used most frequently and access gained was via cell phone.

***A buffet of SNSs.*** As stated earlier, professionals used a variety of SNSs when working with and for the clientele. This smorgasbord of SNSs created anxiety for some. For one family life educator, the buffet of SNSs meant she had to re-evaluate their usefulness to her:

*I finally have come to terms with the fact that I'm not going to use all of that technology that's out there. I told my husband it's like knowing Nordstrom exists; it doesn't mean I have to shop at Nordstrom's. (CFLE-NDN-M-1)*

Creating a SNS fast food society where the expectation is service is fast and if it is not, patience wanes was another impact observed. One social worker stated, “*We want it here right now and we want it fast*” (LBSW-NDN-2).

Despite the awareness of the utilities of SNSs, a concern about their use was the potential for new social issues to surface. The lack of filters for sharing and uploading personal information, not managing one’s privacy settings, or the drive to have constant internet connectivity with one’s cell phone were seen as just the tip of the iceberg when it came to potential issues. Parameters of digital sharing of confidential information as well as cyber-stalking, sexting, pornography, and communication and relationship issues were other potential issues participants felt were on the forefront.

***Where are the guidelines?*** There was a gap in clear policies or guidelines in regards to how services were administered and delivered via SNSs. If an agency did have some semblance of a SNS policy, participants had a vague awareness of what the policy stated and many could not articulate what was in the policy. These gaps primarily revolved around the definition of client, guidelines surrounding ‘friending or unfriending’ clients, and the legality of ‘creeping’ on clients. In the absence of clear and specific policies, professionals responded to these holes by creating their own definition of client and created guidelines for monitoring their own online behavior with clients.

Regardless of whether a professional was ‘friending’ someone in his or her personal life, a co-worker, or another professional or client, a majority of participants required a face-to-face

relationship prior to ‘friending’ them online. Social workers were less likely than family life educators to ‘friend’ a former or current client. One social worker stated, “*I kind of have this once a client, always a client kind of rule so to me, it wouldn't be okay*” (LCSW-DN-1). Those professionals who did have an online relationship with a former or current client stated it was the client who initiated the ‘friend’ request. The type of client was a precursor to whether or not a professional would accept the ‘friend’ request. Clients who had a severe mental illness, history of alcohol and drug issues, or had a criminal history were much more likely not to have their ‘friend’ request accepted by the professional. Guidelines for accepting these requests loosened if they were an Extension agent, foster parent, parents who had participated in family life education training or seminars, students, and other professionals. However, even with these sanctioned clients, if the client crossed an unethical boundary or posted what the professional thought was inappropriate, the professional either private messaged them to confront their behavior or ‘de-friended’ them. One family life educator reported being protective of the image of her SNS as seen in this statement:

*I had a guy who was just so depressed all the time and I unfriended him. I'm like, “You know what? I don't want to hear that, I don't want to see that. I don't want other people to hear and see that.” I try to keep things upbeat, uplifting, you know, that type of thing.* (CFLE-NDN-M-4)

As highlighted in an earlier theme, many of the professionals admitted to ‘creeping’ on clients. While many professionals held to a high standard of issues surrounding the confidentiality of clients and the client’s personal information while offline, this did not ring true online. Very few professionals acknowledged or discussed the client’s digital privacy rights. However, it was found that a few agencies had responded to these gaps by offering various types

of in-service trainings or allowed their personnel to attend outside trainings or webinars. For this social worker, the agency provided training on how to use Facebook to see what clients were doing:

*Our agency had some training recently and gave us a demonstration on Facebook and how you can do this and how you can look at their [clients] friends and how you can see who their friends are and then how you can know what they are doing. (LBSW-NDN-1)*

Most of the trainings reported were focused on protecting the professional's online information and, occasionally, some digital ethics.

It was apparent that in the absence of clear policies, the professionals took it upon themselves to create their own guidelines on what type of client would be an acceptable 'friend.' In addition, defining the type of client made a difference as to whether or not a 'friend' request was granted.

**Theme 2: Recognizing posts have consequences.** Impact around online posts revolved around recognizing issues of privacy, relationships, and future consequences.

***Leaving a digital footprint.*** Professionals were mindful that posts were leaving behind an imprint much like someone leaving a footprint in sand. The difference was that the digital footprint was permanent. Why would this matter, especially to a professional? It was no secret to both social workers and family life educators that digital information could be made public with or without one's permission. Even with tight privacy settings, information could be uploaded or downloaded and then uploaded again elsewhere. The other issue with posts was that a person never knew who was viewing the information and for what reason:

*The bottom line is Facebook and Twitter and all social networking sites; their privacy policies change regularly and the information that you type into your computer is their information. They can use it in the future however they'd like; I mean that's the bottom line is that we're trusting these sites way too much, I think way too much. (CFLE-DN-B-3)*

Most professionals reported not being necessarily concerned about the SNSs per se, but were cautious with posts due to the possibility that supervisors, co-workers, or clients might be viewing these posts. This was especially concerning since the professional had no control over what was being posted by someone else.

***Consequences with relationships.*** Some professionals were apprehensive about the impact SNSs were having with the quality of relationships. One social worker stated, *“In my opinion, it really takes away from the personalization and it's impacted our ability to function and have a conversation and carry on a conversation”* (LMSW-DN-2). Others found it created an environment for secrets and mistrust. This perception came from having the ability to create an online identity that might or might not include accurate information.

Nonetheless, one of the biggest consequences to posts was the power these had to shape the opinion of others and what professionals thought about themselves. This was a significant concern. Numerous participants commented on how their opinions were influenced by the content of someone else's posts. Assumptions were made about a person's character, integrity, or even ability to practice professionally. This family life educator stated, *“It's very hard to erase an image once it's formed, and it's so easy to form images and opinions online, so just to be careful of what you're putting out there”* (CFLE-NDN-M-5). Some of the posts seen were created by the professional who did not have the ability to self-censor or it was not in his or her

awareness about how people would perceive the posts. Not having control over what others could potentially post about the professional was a bit unsettling. Professionals were aware that clients and other professionals were Googling them online. This caused the professionals to feel concerned with misinformation and information being misconstrued online, which could ultimately impact the client's or another professional's perception of them.

A surprising finding was the impact posts had on the professionals themselves. One particular family life educator commented on how reading posts made her feel bad about herself:

*I think when you look at Facebook it does something to you internally; it made me feel bad when I looked at Facebook. I saw a quote and it has stuck with me. It said, "When you look at Facebook you're comparing your behind-the-scenes self with someone's highlight reel" [F. Cole Jones, November 8, 2012] and that stuck with me because I'm like, "That's exactly right." People post the best things about their life on Facebook of course, that's normal, but you subconsciously compare yourself thinking, "Oh, they're married, why am I not married? Look at their beautiful children. Oh look, they went on this gorgeous vacation." Why am I doing that? I would feel guilty for feeling like that. I'm like, "Why am I feeling like that? I should be more confident in myself." It's subconscious, but I think you really do start ... It wasn't making me feel good when I was logged on. When I started picking up on that and so I don't use Facebook anymore. That was a sick cycle, a sick cycle, and when I got off, I felt so much better. (CFLE-DN-B-3)*

For some professionals, being self-aware of how SNSs were impacting them personally was an important discovery.

***Future impact of posts unknown.*** Professionals were uncertain regarding SNS use and the power they would hold on the future. Drawbacks to being careless with online or offline



behavior had resulted in seeing co-workers reprimanded or fired. The propensity for posts to be public and permanent did create awareness among them and helped shape their online behavior. One family life educator was aware there could be consequences to not closely monitoring one's online behavior: *"I think that again it comes down to professionalism and what is professional behavior and what isn't, and how everything you put on online, even if you delete it, you know that it's not really gone"* (CFLE-NDN-M-5).

**Theme 3: The need to protect oneself.** Watching and hearing the experience of other professionals, within the same discipline or not, proved advantageous for family life educators and social workers. The lesson learned was the need to protect one's personal and professional selves.

**Privacy.** Because professionals, in general, blended the personal and professional selves, it was difficult to separate the two on- and off-line. As a result, both groups found the need to limit the amount of personal information shared online. This was done by limiting personal posts altogether or posting very little personal identifying information. One family life educator stated, *"I am a very private person so I like to keep what I am doing private unless it's professional, and then I don't mind sharing it"* (CFLE-NDN-M-3). For some professionals, monitoring the privacy settings so as to have some control over who had access to their personal information was critical in keeping control of their privacy. This was done by changing the privacy settings frequently, reviewing the list of 'friends' and 'de-friending' as needed, and limiting the 'likes' of a webpage so as not to have that personal preference information show up on the professional's webpage.

***Concern for posts and 'friends'***. With the exception of one family life educator, all other participants used SNSs at least for personal use. These participants admitted to posting cautiously. One social worker stated:

*I have the mindset the world is going to see this or the world is going to be able to read it and once this is in cyber space it is out there permanently. So that has me feel so very real. I put very minimal information on there. (LBSW-NDN-2)*

Not only were the professionals found to post cautiously to protect their personal identity, but they also wanted to protect their family members as well. One family life educator remarked, *"I'm really careful in posting pictures of my children where you can easily recognize their faces. I may post a picture of something that we're doing, but I'm a little more careful"* (CFLE-NDN-M-5). Again, hovering in the thoughts of the professionals were the questions, "Who is seeing this information and what are they going to do with it?" Some made a point to begin teaching their children on the potential consequences of SNS's posts about appropriate digital behavior.

For one family life educator, it became apparent that she monitored her personal life because it would influence her professional life:

*I'm very careful about what I do say on there because it also serves as the entry point for my professional fan pages. So I'm always very aware that whatever I'm saying out there in a personal way reflects on me in a professional way. (CFLE-NDN-B-3)*

Some professionals stated that they tried very hard to keep their personal and professional lives separate. However, more often than not, a blending of the two occurred providing professionals with opportunities to practice self-awareness.

***Agencies need to step-up.*** Participants expressed the need for concrete guidelines about SNSs within their agencies. Even if policies were in place, very few actually had seen a copy of the policy. There also was a desire for additional training on utilizing SNSs in practice, ethical use of SNSs, and managing oneself online. As previously stated, the perception was employers were ‘creeping’ on professionals for a variety of reasons. Professionals had mixed-feelings regarding whether or not they should be held accountable for their off-the-clock behavior:

*I don't agree about the whole company is looking at people's Facebook pages.*

*That rubs me the wrong way whenever I hear that happening. People lose their jobs because of stuff like that. I have a life outside of this place. You hear about people all the time, losing their jobs because of something that they put out there. (LCSW-NDN-3)*

Without concrete policies in place, professionals were unsure as to what was acceptable SNS use within and outside the agency.

**Theme 4: Developing a sense of professional netiquette.** Regardless of whether there were policies in place, professionals developed their own standards for digital behavior and they used these same standards to measure the behavior of other professionals.

***Standards for professional digital behavior.*** Surprisingly, very few social workers or family life educators referenced the profession's code of ethics as a tool used to guide digital behavior. More often than not, the yardstick deemed suitable for professional netiquette came from key figures in the professional's lives. These two professionals shared what they consider when they are about to post online:

*Usually I think, "What would I want my grandmother to see?" I usually kind of consider, "Is it something appropriate for everyone to see? Is it something I really want*

*to share with myself to everybody on my site?" Because we all have those friends that we never talk to but it's like, "Do we really want them to know about that?" (LMSW-DN-3)*

*If it's anything that I'd be embarrassed for my mother to see, I will not put it on there. (CFLE-DN-M-2)*

For a few, it was about spirituality:

*Personally, I am a woman of faith. My faith is very important to me. I let that serve as an ethical guideline. For me it's not just maintaining a professional identity. I'm a Christian and so it's something that I would feel very comfortable standing by. I think that again it comes down to professionalism and what is professional behavior and what isn't, and how everything you put on online, even if you delete it, you know that it's not really gone. (CFLE-ND-M-5)*

This social worker drew from a variety of sources to determine what was appropriate:

*I guess it's just using good judgment. Partially it's my education but partially it's just the way I was raised. Even before I was a professional, if you're not proud to put that out there, you don't need the whole world to know about it. I guess I was just kind of raised with those morals and have always valued privacy. (LMSW-DN-3)*

Regardless of the driving force behind the benchmark, parameters were developed out of an internal personal set of ethical principles and standards rather than universal principles and standards of the profession. One family life educator confirms this in his statement:

*There are really no hard-and-fast guidelines. Every situation is different. I definitely would recommend for everyone that uses social media that they've got to come up with their own personal standard of what they will and will not post. I see people that go on with these tirades of profanity and suggestive pictures and things like that. I think, "Oh Jeez that stuff doesn't go away." CFLE-DN-M-3)*

**Guidelines for posting.** Self-monitored guidelines focused on activities done on- and offline. One should be aware of one's role, title, and degree when a professional was on or off the clock. When online, the standards for posting were described as follows:

1. Posts should be generic in nature. *"I usually write generic, general comments"* (LBSW-NDN-1).
2. Posts should contain no bad language. *"I don't cuss on there"* (LBSW-DN-2).
3. Airing of one's "dirty laundry" was unacceptable. *"Facebook is not for counseling."* (CFLE-DN-M-3)
4. Ranting was unacceptable. *Hypothetically, if I sat there and posted this just giant long rant about something that happened, while it's my personal site, and even though I have my security restricted, they would still have access to it unless I blocked them from seeing that. And there is no guarantee you'd remember to block them from seeing that. They could get offended, think less of me, and have a lower opinion of my ability to practice in my position. I think there's a lot of impact. I know agencies will check Facebook when they get an application. Truly to see what's posted. That's why I evaluate pictures, posts, everything that goes on there.* (LBSW-DN-2)
5. Stay away from "hot topics" such as politics or religion. *"I'm talking about the overtly inappropriate things. Yeah, religion, politics, I fought with my spouse today I hate him or her, getting drunk, can't drive home. I'm talking about over the top things"* (CFLE-DN-B-3).
6. Do not post too many details about work and clientele served. *"Don't badmouth work. Don't talk about work. Be positive. Even then, you have to be careful depending on the*

*population you're working with. Generally speaking you just don't post about work; just because I've seen it get people fired” (CFLE-DN-B-2).*

7. Be considerate of other’s feelings. *You should always consider other people's feelings” (CFLE-DN-M-4).*

8. Make sure messages sent were received accurately. *We lose a lot of the, the social non-verbal things. And people read what they see, not necessarily what is meant. And there may be 900 people that see that same page, and they take it a different way than it was meant, and then you start a whole other conversation, which has nothing to do with your feedback. (CFLE-NDN-M-4)*

Standards for offline behavior were found to be less defined but common themes concentrated on being conscious of one’s appearance because someone might be watching or be photographing the professional’s behavior. Wearing inappropriate clothing and getting drunk were considered deal breakers. One family life educator reported that he refused to put himself in a situation that might compromise his integrity. He stated, *“So, I don't want to put myself in that position where they can be drunk Facebooking me or anything like that because it doesn't go away even if I press delete” (CFLE-DN-B-4).*

***Professionals represent more than themselves.*** It was important for participants to be identified as professionals and a majority of the participants understood how they acted on- and off-line impacted more than just them. Representation was also about the agency, the education and the certifications held:

*I try to be a lot more careful about what I say on social networking sites. I try to remember that I am a representative of the agency I work for. So therefore, I try to be professional, even on my personal site. I try to be professional about how I respond to*

*things, because I represent the agency that I work for, the degree that I hold and the qualifications that I have. I'm a representation of those. I try to keep that in mind when I post things on social network sites. (CFLE-DN-B-1)*

As previously mentioned, the personal and professional selves seemed to blend together. The necessity for integrity in both arenas was found to be significant. Many professionals felt it was impossible to separate these two: “*We need to represent ourselves well because you don't just stop being a professional when you're off the clock. You're still one*” (CFLE-DN-M-1). This family life educator gave the charge to other professionals to “walk the talk:”

*They need to keep in mind that even when they're not on the clock, when their clients see them on the street, they still know who they are. They still associate them with the services they provide. They should make sure that what they're doing and posting is consistent with the image of what they're teaching their clients. (CFLE-DN-B-1)*

The effect professionals felt regarding how SNSs were impacting their work in the field was not so much in the direct services with clients, although that was a part of it, but the impact was more so to help guide their practice. Acknowledging the benefits of using SNSs in practice was essential for continued use. Professionals watched others make mistakes and used these observations to develop or modify their own online behavior. There were benefits to using SNSs with clients, but the far greater benefits were seen and felt on a personal level for both social workers and family life educators to help guide their professional practice.

### **Research Question 3: What strategies are being employed to help guide professional practice?**

Human service professionals employed a variety of tactics to assist them in their professional work. These strategies centered on safeguarding the personal life of the

professional, both on- and offline, maintaining a professional identity, and strategies to use while at work.

**Theme 1: Safeguard personal life.** It was important for professionals to have some sense of control over their off-the-clock selves. Strategies were developed as they became more aware of the consequences of having an online presence, leading them to design specific tools to manage their privacy. This awareness meant that on some level they recognized that anything done online could and would have a lasting effect. Digital footprints were permanent as seen by this social work digital native, *“It’s always there. That’s my biggest thing. It’s always there”* (LMSW-DN-2). These footprints, while quite possibly out of sight from the professional and others, had the capability to surface anytime and anywhere. Knowing information could reemerge and become public was a bit disconcerting to the participants. Besides being a permanent record, they never knew who might be viewing the information and for what reason. One social worker stated, *“Even though it’s personal, like I said, anybody can access it. Anybody can see it. You never know who is looking at it”* (LBSW-NDN-2). A family life educator stated, *“Knowing that the information we put into our computers is kept and saved is a slippery slope because the information that these sites have could be used negatively against us in the future”* (CFLE-DN-B-3). The inability to have total privacy also meant the professional could be connected to an unwanted post: *“Even your friends can post something and tag you in it. And then, there’s an association”* (LBSW-NDN-2). As a result of privacy not being absolute, professionals put in place strategies to help protect and maintain privacy in their personal lives.

Although both family life educators and social workers expressed personal privacy as a big concern as they work with clientele, social workers reported more often that they maximized privacy settings in order to have some control over privacy. One social worker stated, *“I am*



*constantly changing my privacy settings as the websites change their preferences and their layouts. Privacy is key, especially in this field” (LBSW-DN-1). Another social worker stated, “I have my profile set as private as I can have it. Then I have my friend list to varying degrees of privacy, based upon the individual” (LMSW-DN-1).*

Rarely posting, limiting posts or providing very little personal information was employed by some participants to protect their privacy. One social worker stated, *“I am leery about posting much on there” (LCSW-NDN-1). One family life educator stated, “I’m not likely to post my information on websites, like personal information. I’m more likely to see what other people are doing, rather than post a lot of information about me” (CFLE-DN-B-1). Each of these tactics, when used, provided the professionals with some level of reassurance that their privacy would not be compromised.*

Another strategy used was to try and avoid unsolicited posts. One family life educator used a more proactive stance to ward off unwanted tags:

*I limit who I connect with; being sure to not let someone tag you before you approve the pictures that you see people taking and you don’t want them shown to everyone. It’s just so much more now than monitoring what goes on your Facebook; it’s like monitoring what people are capturing in your personal life. (CFLE-DN-B-3)*

It was found by limiting a person’s ‘friends,’ the risk of one’s personal information being exposed was reduced. Some professionals would routinely go through and purge ‘friends’:

*I have got a bunch of friend requests in my Facebook right now because I don’t know if I want them to have that access. It has probably been eight months since I have added somebody on Facebook and I routinely go through and get rid of people. If it is just a person I haven’t connected within the last six months, they are obviously not an*

*important person to keep in my life. I keep my Facebook fairly small to fewer than 100 people and some of these connections are professional and some of them are personal and things like that. (CFLE-DN-B-4)*

Taking care not to 'like' too many posts or ads also was described as a valuable tool in order to keep personal information private. Professionals recognized that the more times they 'liked' a page, post or ad, the more likely this information would show up on his or her own webpage; creating an opportunity for others to see and make assumptions about lifestyle choices. One social worker expressed concern about having members of her church see the types of items she 'liked' online:

*I think about privacy a lot. Sometimes, I don't 'like' some stuff because it's going to show up on my page, and I have to admit that. I'm active in my church. I'm probably not as conservative as a lot of people at my church are. I hate that I'm like this, but I find myself not liking stuff because maybe it'll show up. (LCSW-NDN-3)*

Googling oneself (conducting an online search) was a tool a few professionals mentioned to see how much was being shared about them online. One family life educator stated:

*I Google myself to see what comes up and if it's something that I don't like or don't want to come up, which hasn't really happened, but I would try to get that removed. I'm more aware and more alert and I'm more tuned into ... Maybe I'm being too cautious about the damage that it can create. (CFLE-DN-B-3)*

Using Google as a means to discover what information was being shared or who was looking for information on the professional, proved to be a viable option for professionals. While used by few, a majority of professionals did not mention using this regularly.

***Separating the personal and professional selves.*** For some professionals, whether real or perceived, the attempt to control privacy was accomplished by keeping their personal and professional lives separate. An interesting finding revealed master's level non-digital natives and bachelor level digital native family life educators and social workers were more likely to manage privacy by separating their personal and professional lives. One family life educator simply stated, "*They're separate for me. No, they do not intermix*" (CFLE-DND-M-1). Despite reporting this separation, the participants did not elaborate on how they specifically managed to keep the two separate.

The types of SNSs utilized were sometimes chosen for the amount of control the professional had over the flow of communication to and from 'friends.' Users of Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram believed they had more control over who was seeing personal information than a site like Facebook. One family life educator provided her rationale to using Instagram:

*I like it because when you post or comment you don't get the news feed from other people that have come behind you to comment. Another reason I prefer Instagram because you don't necessarily know what I'm looking at in terms of tracking. I don't have to worry about a stranger coming behind me commenting and they're reading my comment or I'm reading their comment. (CFLE-NDN-B-5)*

***The world is getting smaller.*** The use of SNSs was seen as making the world seem smaller. For one participant, reactions to the shrinking world were perceived as potentially negative: "*The world is a lot smaller than you think. They post something and then a friend of a friend sees it and it starts a mess. So you have to be always aware of it*" (LBSW-DN-1). Being

hyper-vigilant was a cost of online behavior for this person. However, for this next participant, opportunity was seen as a benefit:

*Basically in a way **it's making the world smaller** [emphasis added] because now I have people that I know. I hesitate to call them "friends" because it's not like we've ever actually sat down face-to-face and had a cup of tea or anything, but I now know people from across the globe that I would never have come in contact with because of a social networking site, because they're a friend of a friend of a friend and we thought that if we had some similar interests, we'd start discussing things (CFLE-NDN-B-4).*

Regardless of the viewpoint shared, the theory of six degrees of freedom has the potential to be far less than six degrees as a result of social networking. One social worker shared her thoughts about this:

*I'm not a big poster [of information]. I don't divulge any information on Facebook that I wouldn't tell my clients directly. I know that they used to say that there was the 7 degrees of separation, and with Facebook and things, I believe it's down to 3 or 4 now. Usually I know somebody who knows somebody. I know just from my friends' list, just seeing people that I'm like, "How do you know that person that I know in a very different way?" Privacy is big (LBSW-NDN-3).*

While not a guarantee for privacy, some professionals chose not to have a digital presence:

*I used to have a Facebook account, but it is deactivated now. I don't use that anymore for a lot of different reasons. Primarily because the friends that I accumulated, acquaintances, just people I really didn't know, were getting a really personal look into my life that I didn't want to give. Even if I didn't post anything on my page about what I*

*was doing or post any pictures or post any events or any personal information, other people could post and tag things on my wall including pictures. I felt like it was getting a little just out of control, it was like I'm looking at my friends, these people who some of them I don't know, I don't care to know and they know what I did on Friday, where I was and a picture of me and it just felt I had to take a step back” (CFLE-DN-B-3)*

Privacy was a grave concern not only for the professional, but also for the protection of the professional’s family. As a result, professionals enacted a variety of tools that could be used to keep their private information from going public.

**Theme 2: Strategies for maintaining professional integrity.** The second theme found to help guide professional practice was based on the expectations of professionalism. Being professional was a way of life, which came with responsibility both on- and off-line. Wearing the title of professional also came with a set of strategies for conducting oneself on- and off-the-clock, which concentrated primarily on posting, friending and unfriending, and providing feedback to other professionals.

***Identifying as a professional.*** Being seen as a professional was more than having obtained a degree and certification or licensure. It meant having some level of integrity. This meant that the professional’s walk [lifestyle] and talk needed to match regardless of whether the professional was on- or offline or whether he or she was at home or at work. This quote from a social worker articulates the professional’s need to see the “bigger picture:”

*I expect to see the same behavior as I see on the clock. That you are mindful of the code of ethics, that you understand that whatever you put out there, everybody else can see. That just because you are off the clock doesn’t mean you can do whatever it is*

*that you want to do. Because you are still a member of an organization, you still need to represent that organization professionally. (MSW-NDN-5)*

For another social worker, being professional was a way of life: *“It not what I do, it’s who I am. I try to be a person of integrity in my job and in my personal life too” (LCSW-NDN-4)*. One social worker provided a strategy he uses while online to help him be mindful of the importance of integrity and his obligation as a professional:

*My little picture, my identifier on Facebook, whenever I post something or anything, it says, “Thank God for Social Workers.” It’s a little orange background with those words on it. I do that on purpose because that prevents me a lot of times from getting caught up into some petty conversations. If I’m going to post something, and that is going to be my picture, then I have to represent that. (LCSW-NDN-4)*

It was found that the more education and longevity professionals had in the field, the more responsibility the professional felt to be a positive role model.

*My professional reputation is on the line and for me the further I go, I guess, the more I’m looking at myself as, I don’t want to say as a brand, but almost. You don’t want anything to ruin your name or your reputation because I seek to be seen in a professional way. For me, the further I go, the more education I get, the less I want to be involved in social networking for personal use. (CFLE-B-DN-3)*

For one social worker, the conscience decision to practice ethical digital behavior was motivated by her future plans: *“I just had to look at my career track and where I wanted to be and make those certain compromises to get there” (MSW-NDN-5)*. Knowing the potential for harm utilizing SNSs, personally and professionally, helped guide this professional in her actions.

Maintaining a professional presence on a personal website was an important strategy used for many professionals to demonstrate integrity. Being aware of one's digital behavior helped shape the tone and the image being portrayed. In this quote, the importance of upholding a professional presence was validated:

*I think it's really important to maintain a professional presence. If I acted the way that some of my Facebook friends act on Facebook, I think people might say, "Why would I go to see her for counseling? She really doesn't have her life together." I think it's important to convey that to people and that you can show self-control, you're dignified and can be proud of it and I think that that's important. (LMSW-DN-3)*

This was also significant whether or not the person was offline as well:

*I just see social networking as kind of an extension of the person. Whether you're a professional or not a professional, I just kind of see it as an extension of yourself and if you're professional in the community during the day, I think you should behave professionally off the clock whether or not your job title is a professional or non-professional job title. (LMSW-DN-3)*

Having a professional presence was essential, regardless of whether it was on a personal or professional page. This helped in identifying the professional as worthy of respect and being credible:

*Even though it's private site, I have a public job. I have more of a high-profile job. I want to maintain that professional air even in my personal life. While I would post a picture of my kids or a vacation I've taken, I still am mindful to maintain a level of integrity with what I post. (CFLE-NDN-M-5)*

***Strategies for posting online.*** More often than not, professionals would use their personal SNSs to post information. Very few professionals maintained separate personal and professional SNSs. One particular social worker felt strongly about not managing two SNSs:

*I know people that have a thing called a professional Facebook page and a personal Facebook page; obviously a lot of celebrities do it. I don't have the time. I don't have time to keep track of two logins, two passwords. I feel like if it is not something that I don't want said about me professionally, I don't want it part of my personal life either.*

(LBSW-DN-2)

Professionals who did not want to manage both a personal and professional SNSs, enlisted strategies in order to ensure a professional presence despite using personal SNSs.

A majority of participants found the best way to maintain a professional presence on a personal SNS was to limit or stay away from posting about certain topics. One family life educator stated, *“If you're going to use social media, I think you should be responsible. I try to limit my preferences on politics and religion, school policies; things of that nature”* (CFLE-NDN-B-5). A majority of the participants agreed that it was best for professionals to stay away from politics and religion when it came to posting.

Many professionals simply limited the amount of posting they did. They felt as though the more the person posted, the more likely potential consequences could be experienced. One family life educator recognized the potential for harm when she stated, *“I have a lot of very strong opinions, but I generally keep away from controversy. I am not going to post a bunch of things I know is going to generate the flurry of an argument or tirades”* (CFLE-NDN-M-1).

Social workers, more so than family life educators, were more careful not to include information about personal or work information on their profiles. One social worker stated, *“I*



*don't even have my job listed'* (LCSW-NDN-3). However, when it came to posting about the events of the day or things happening on the job, both groups stated it was better to talk generically and be positive:

*I choose not to post anything that could be misconstrued as hurtful to anyone or as degrading. I'm just pretty mindful to keep it positive, keep it brief, recognize why I'm sharing something.* (CFLE-NDN-M-5)

*I try to be very careful about what I post because I wouldn't want someone to read and misinterpret what I wrote. I don't want other people to feel unsafe by what I posted or to in any way to endanger my son or my family. I keep it G rated. Every once in a while it's PG. I don't cuss on there. I make sure it's wholesome.* (LBSW-DN-2)

This family life educator echoed similar concerns about posting:

*I'm careful of what I say about work. I don't know if that's any different if I was speaking to a friend directly. I wouldn't say anything to them where somebody else could overhear and get hurt. I guess I'm diligent about that and I'm careful that what I put out there. I don't care if the whole world knows, and somebody can copy it, paste it, and send it to somebody else.* (CFLE-NDN-B-2)

By posting cautiously, positively and in a generic manner, it allowed the professionals to have a presence on SNSs but assisted them in keeping a professional tone. In addition, it provided the professionals with some control over safety issues.

***To friend or not to friend.*** When it came to whether or not to friend a person, there were no common rules with the exception of having a face-to-face relationship offline. This was preferred prior to accepting a friend request. This was true for a majority of the participants regardless of whether the 'friend' was personal or another professional. One family life educator

stated, “It’s like I don’t connect with people I’ve just met once or twice. I need to have somewhat of a relationship with them. It needs to be face-to-face” (CFLE-DN-B-5). Having a personal relationship off-line provided the professional with some reassurance of what the online relationship would be like. A family life educator emphasized the importance of knowing the person:

*I have to know who they are. I don’t like connecting to people I don’t know. And then I always look at the intent. What is the intent of this person asking to be my friend? I have my account set up to where you have to ask to be my friend, to see my account. So, first of all it’s, “who are you?” And so second is probably intent, and what’s the purpose? And if I don’t know you, nine times out of ten, I won’t connect with you.*

(CFLE-NDN-M-4)

A few professionals also went as far as to check up on the ‘friend’ prior to accepting the request. This was usually done by Googling the person to see what information popped up about them or by going to their SNS, and if possible, viewing the types of pictures and posts on their SNS. One social worker described a two-step process before she would accept a ‘friend’ request:

*First I even see if I know them. Then if I can I go to look at their page to see what they’re doing. If they’re just doing stuff or acting like in a way that I wouldn’t, or if they’re not saying anything motivating or positive or whatever, I probably won’t follow you.* (LBSW-NDN-2)

This family life educator was more inclined to accept a ‘friend’ request based on having mutual ‘friends’:

*I scroll over to see who I know that they may know, what their efforts or mission is, and then I go from there. I try to be careful with that because you never know who’s*

*looking at your page, and you don't want anyone to walk away with the wrong impression. I'm definitely more apt to accept someone who I have mutual friends with already.* (CFLE-NDN-B-5).

The same strategy was used by another family life educator stated that a majority of her 'friends' were formed online:

*I usually look and see if we have any similar friends. If there isn't anyone, I will sometimes go and see where they're from or see if I can figure out if they might know me somehow. I have an instructor [as a friend] in Romania who does a lot of social media, and I've gotten a ton of friends from her that will usually say her name, but every now and then, I've had somebody from Romania that I don't think she's actually friends with that wanted to friend me. When I saw they were from Romania, I saw pictures of them as parents, I went ahead and friended them. Generally, I usually look to make sure that we got one or more similar friends, and then basically I take however I feel about that friend and decide if these are people I might want to be connected with. That's usually how I decide.* (CFLE-NDN-B-3)

Deciding whom to 'friend' was a decision not taken lightly as by participants because they wanted to protect their professional image. This was especially true if the SNS was used for both personal and professional use. Professionals reported blocking or 'defriending' based on the content of the posts. One social worker stated, "*If somebody gets on there and they start being a whack-job, I'll take them off*" (LCSW-NDN-4). Establishing guidelines for what was seen as inappropriate was important. Another social worker stated, "*You have to really assert your boundaries. I have had to un-friend people who post things to my page of an offensive nature and I will go in and delete them as soon as I see them*" (MSW-NDN-5). The participants

reiterated the importance of being seen as a professional. As a result, they used the above strategies when deciding to request or accept an online friend.

***Giving feedback.*** Professionals enacted a set of guidelines for appropriate and ethical digital behavior. These guidelines provided a tool in which to measure appropriate posts for their online ‘friends’. Not all professionals felt it was their duty to provide feedback to another person. However, for those professionals who did see it as their responsibility, the strategy employed most often was to provide feedback either in a face-to-face conversation or by private message via the SNS. One family life educator discussed how, if given the opportunity, she would handle the situation: *“I would probably address the issue privately with that colleague, whether that's through a private message or talking to them, a phone call or in person, but I would not handle it publicly”* (CFLE-DN-B-1). Another family life educator felt having a face-to-face conversation lessened the chance of information being misconstrued:

*Well, I wouldn't do it over the Internet. It is really a conversation kind of thing. I mean, so much stuff gets lost in translation, in questions, tone of voice, body language, all of that stuff. I know when I get an e-mail from my boss with very pointed words, I really bring it into my head in one way but to the next person it could come off totally different. You can't take that back. So, I am very much a let-us-talk-it-out-in-person kind of thing because, I mean, you get all of those aspects of communication.* (CFLE-DN-B-4)

Other strategies employed by participants revolved around not only confronting the behavior, but taking it a step farther:

*I will go and inbox the person and say, “Hey, I don't put stuff like that on my page, I have friends from work, potential employers look at my page, you know, other*

*community members.” It’s kind of like it’s always in the back of my mind. What if a funder saw that? Because funding is such a huge piece of what I do here, so I will unfriend people if they can’t respect that I only want certain content associated with my name and my page. (MSW-NDN-5)*

For some professionals, feedback would not be given unless they were in a supervisory position: “*Not from me, no. I’m not in a supervisory position. If anybody did something that’s boneheaded, that would warrant something a supervisor would have to speak to them about*” (CFLE-NDN-B-4). It appeared that participants were more comfortable and felt a sense of obligation to youth and students. This quote showed a teaching approach when providing feedback:

*Another professional, no but students, yes probably. I’d probably take more of a personal approach, like, for me I’m just very careful about what I post, just because I feel we have to be careful, because whatever we voice may be highly considered unthought-of by others - that kind of thing. It would be face-to-face. I would just think that would be the best way to have that kind of a conversation. (CFLE-DN-M-2)*

When it came to providing feedback, the majority of the participants would prefer to confront a person’s digital behavior using what they perceived as more humane and personal means. The fear of having something taken out of context was a concern. The type of relationship also factored into whether or not feedback was given:

*It all depends on my level of knowing the person. If I know the person professionally, I would contact that person, not through the Internet, or not like that. I would try to pick up the phone so they could hear my voice and hear my concern about what they posted on line. (CFLE-NDN-M-3)*

Regardless, when providing feedback to the person, the expectation was that the relationship, whether personal or professional, needed to be sturdy enough to hear the constructive criticism.

**Theme 3: Strategies to use while at work.** Professionals employed various strategies to guide them in professional practice. These centered on the work with clientele, self-care, and being a responsible employee. Professionals established certain individual criteria and parameters around with whom they would connect, when and how they would connect, and for what purpose. Participants found that in order to work in the best interest of the client, it was necessary to have an understanding of how the people they served were accessing and using SNSs. In this exemplar, a family life educator provides insight into how she used SNSs for communication based on her clientele:

*A lot of the families that I worked with, they may not have a computer, but they have a smart phone. I think the way human services or helping professionals work with families looks different. I think families are accessing social networking sites, definitely professionals. One of the ways we used was when I worked with teen parents, we had a Facebook page for our group and that was one of the ways to let them know what was going on. They may not respond to the phone call. They may not answer the phone or maybe they don't have a phone but they had access to a computer. That was one ways to let them know about groups and just to give them another kind of safe space that was theirs for them to reflect on whatever topic that we talked about. (CFLE-NDN-M-2)*

Conversely, a social worker found her clientele did not regularly use SNSs: “*A majority of patients I see like the ones on Medicare and have a disability or are elderly, they don't really use it*” (LBSW-NDN-2).

While several professionals did not use SNSs with clients, having information about how clients were using or not using SNSs was still useful. As previously stated, it was found the type of client determined whether or not a professional would consider ‘friending’ a client. One professional worked with foster parents and saw them in a different way from other clients she had worked with in the past:

*I know everybody uses things differently. I'm working with other people that I view more in a professional realm. Our foster parents, you have to go through training. Most of them do have degrees and most of them are in a place where my confidentiality with them, or my policies with them, are different than when I was a case manager and I was dealing with a different clientele. (LBSW-NDN-3)*

A majority of participants indicated that they would not ‘friend’ a current client. One social worker utilized her code of ethics in deciding not to friend a client:

*They are a client always. It does not matter. That started the moment I was in BSW School. That's my client. Our code of ethics is very clear, I feel, on those types of relationships. For me, there's no give. (LMSW-DN-2)*

Although some participants followed the rule that “Once a client always a client,” only rarely was it stated as a result of the profession’s code of ethics. Whether or not the participant had the propensity to follow the profession’s code of ethics did not seem to have as much influence as the type of client. Whether or not the professional accepted a friend request was determined more so than not based on the mental health and history of the client as well as the type of role the professional had with the client. Overall, social workers were less likely to friend current clients than family life educators.

***Strategies for self-care.*** Accessing SNSs for personal use while at work was primarily for the purpose of taking a break from work. It allowed the professional to touch bases with his or her personal life while at work. The perception of the professional was that SNSs were being accessed at all times throughout the day and for a variety of reasons by employees; however, participants self-reported using it mainly to escape. One family life educator stated she accessed SNSs, “*When there's down time, maybe in the airport, between mentoring sessions, or maybe during the lunch hour, just any random time that I want to take a breather from reality*” (CFLE-NDN-B-5).

***Strategies for being a responsible employee.*** Being identified as a professional and with integrity also meant these behaviors carried over into the workplace. Professionals recognized that Internet connectivity meant almost instant access anytime and anywhere. For one family life educator, it was no surprise to find employees accessing SNSs while on the job:

*Employees are accessing it during work time. I think that as our interest in social media and our use of social media is increasing, the line between personal and professional is a lot less black and white than it used to be. I mentioned that my Facebook page is personal, but on it I follow many, many professional organizations including those connected with my university or my alma maters, or professional societies that I'm a member of.* (CFLE-NDN-M-5)

Despite the instant access, it was found that a majority of professionals accessed SNSs for personal use primarily over breaks and at lunch time. One family life educator shared the importance of integrity while at work:

*At my agency, I can access any website I want on my work computer, but I choose not to access things like Facebook, LinkedIn, or anything like that. Any personal use, I*



*don't use on my work computer. I save it strictly for my personal computer because it is fraud, if you know what I mean. I do not want to ever be accused of getting paid for not working. And quite frankly, I am busy enough during the day that I don't have time to be on Facebook by my work computer. Like, I have to get stuff going that I know and it is not a time for things like Facebook or whatever. Sure, I may use Facebook when I'm on my 15-minute break within that because it is my time now and not work time. (CFLE-DN-B-4)*

Another participant found employees to be both responsible and irresponsible when it came to utilizing SNSs at work for personal use:

*If people get a break during the day, they're less likely to walk outside, stand outside for a minute, or go get a cup of coffee. They're more likely to jump on Facebook. I will see people such as co-workers with really bad boundaries. They will be on Facebook. Their Facebook page will be up all day. They may not be checking it all day, but it's still in the background. Then I also see the co-workers who check it on their phone when they get a break. I'll see the co-workers who do it before and after work but never in between. (CFLE-DN-B-2)*

Access was gained by either cell phone or by the agency computers. However, very few professionals reported policies in place for using SNSs for personal use while at work.

Participants seemed motivated to monitor their SNS usage while at work simply because they felt their employers were watching them. While it may not have changed what the professional might post, it did create an awareness that someone might be watching:

*I know when I worked for an Education Service Center I was more cautious about what I would put on the social media sites than perhaps I am now because I had every*

*reason to believe that they [employers] were checking. That doesn't mean I was going to blast on or anything, I just was more self-conscious about what I wrote, even if it was just something about my personal life and joking. I just didn't like the idea of that. I think being tied to an organization, for me anyway, certainly limited how I would use social media.* (CFLE-NDN-M-1)

Besides being aware of employers who might be monitoring SNS activity, a few professionals refused to friend co-workers. For one family life educator, it was not only because co-workers could glimpse into the personal life, but this professional also felt strongly about maintaining separation between her personal and professional lives:

*I try to keep those lines separate. I really don't have friends on my personal page that I work with just because there does need to be some separateness, I think. If we work together in the previous job and we don't have to work together now, then you can maybe be my friend because I don't see you every day. I think that there's a line that should be, that I don't believe I am crossing. It's not like I am doing something that I shouldn't but this is a part of my personal life and I don't want you to know that about my personal life because we work together. I just think there are some lines that you just shouldn't cross.* (CFLE-NDN-M-2)

Another family life educator remarked, *"I actually blocked the deans, the provost, anybody higher than me that might have control over any promotions later from even seeing that I'm online"* (CFLE-NDN-B-2). Again, this professional felt the need to keep her personal and professional lives separate.

When it came to professional SNSs such as LinkedIn, professionals were more apt to allow employers access to their information. Even though many professionals felt that the

personal and professional selves blended, for some, the idea of having an employer having access to one's personal life was a bit unsettling:

*While I have a few friends in my area of expertise, coworkers that I'm friends with on Facebook, I would not necessarily feel comfortable friending my boss. My boss would get a LinkedIn connection. I'm sort of still on the fence as far as how much of our personal life can be policed by our job. When I'm off the clock, my boss can't tell me what to do, unless it's something that directly affects my work. She can't tell me to go home and not have a glass of wine with dinner if she's a teetotaler. That's not allowed. That's my personal life. She can't direct my romantic life with my husband. That's my personal life. (CFLE-NDN-B-4)*

Hearing about people losing jobs as a result of inappropriate digital behavior or accessing SNSs while on the job helped this social worker learn from the experience of others, *"I've heard about people losing their jobs. That's probably the big one where people didn't realize, 'Oh, hell, I put something out there,' and then they got in trouble at work for it"* (LCSW-NDN-2). A majority of professionals had heard about or knew someone who had been reprimanded or lost a job due to the content of their SNSs or taking advantage of company time for personal SNSs use. This social worker reported how the laws are changing, allowing agencies to take a more proactive stance with an employee's SNSs use on or off the clock:

*So at first, it was a first amendment issue and we were not allowed to take any action. We recently fired a degreed person; someone considered a mental health professional, because they made an open threat to a coworker on Facebook. So now the law has changed and we can be a little bit stricter with our employees and what we put out there. (MSW-NDN-5)*

Participants employed multiple strategies to assist them while at work. Utilizing these tools provided a way for the professional to enhance their job performance. Gaining an understanding on how the clientele were utilizing SNSs provided an incentive for the participants to keep current on the various utilities of SNSs. Being able to escape the hassles of the day by looking at Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, or any other SNS, allowed the professional a means to recharge and refuel before heading back into the frontlines. Finally, strategies were developed which allowed participants to be responsible workers. These strategies focused on not taking advantage of the agency's time and being mindful of potential consequence to accessing SNSs or 'friending' co-workers.

Exploring how family life educators and social workers were using SNSs in practice, the impact of it use and strategies developed and put in place to guide practice have been discussed. Chapter Four will allow for a discussion of the implications of these findings.

## **Chapter 4 - Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of social networking sites (SNSs) and their impact on practicing human service professionals. The over-arching research question was: How are SNSs shaping practice for human service professionals? Social workers and family life educators working in some capacity in the field of human services provided insight on the following three specific research questions to help guide the analyses: (1) How are human service professionals using SNSs in practice? (2) How do human service professionals see SNSs as impacting how they work with clients? (3) What strategies are being employed to help guide professional practice? This chapter will summarize key findings, provide implications for research and practice and discuss the strengths and weakness of this study.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

#### **Change is Here**

Transformation is taking place within the human services arena as a result of agencies embracing technology and its capabilities. Participants in this study reported that their agencies are capitalizing on the versatility of SNSs to promote and market services and events, disseminate solid research information, communicate with clientele and stakeholders, and to recruit for new employees and potential clients This is similar to what Asay and Lal (2014) found. SNSs create a new way to network with other professionals and organizations. Connecting online allows professionals to expand their repertoire of resources. A professional can literally locate resources from almost any place in the world by using SNSs. Despite the utility of SNSs to reach more people and in a more rapid fashion, utilizing SNSs compliment rather than replace the work being done off-line. SNSs can assist the professional with the ability to meet the demands of his or her job.

***Underutilization.*** Even though participants reported that their agencies utilize SNSs, underutilization was still perceived. Even among professionals who use SNSs daily, the longest amount of time spent using SNSs professionally totaled roughly only one hour per day, which is broken up over the course of the workday. A majority of participants use SNSs just occasionally and some not at all, regardless of their digital status. However, one of the biggest factors impacting underutilization is non-profit agencies being understaffed. Mattison (2012) stated that human service professionals are often tasked with doing more with less, leading them to function with less-than-current technologies. Limited funds require that choices are made regarding service delivery or keeping technology up-to-date. Doing more with fewer resources and being part of a small agency creates stress. A reactionary strategy for agencies is to host some type of technology use in-service trainings or to send employees to professional development trainings and webinars, all of which barely scratch the surface to what information is truly needed for best practices using digital technology. Ironically, if the professionals utilize SNSs more efficiently, it is possible that more can be accomplished.

Underutilization also can be explained in part by the fact so many agencies are still learning how to best capitalize on the utility of SNSs for the agency. The impact of using SNSs in human services has the potential to be so far reaching, but at what cost? Lannin and Scott (2013) found legal and liability issues to be a growing concern. Professionals in the current study, show a high level of caution when it comes to SNS use. It is possible that the professionals are waiting to embrace all aspects of SNSs until they have some reassurance or someone presents some clear and hard evidence of the benefits and consequences of using it in practice (Mattison, 2012). More importantly, generating policies might help guide digital use in

practice. It appears that SNS use in practice is a moving target regardless of whether agencies are embracing all technology offers them, change is here.

Professionals in this study also showed a high level of conscientious about privacy, boundaries, and professionalism as it pertains to online behavior. While both social work and family life education professionals have codes of ethics, neither profession has codes that specifically guide online digital behavior. In the absence of specific or up-to-date standards, professionals are left to develop their own guidelines regarding the client/professional relationship and how a professional should behave on- and offline (Mattison, 2012). A majority of participants have the expectation that a person's online and offline behavior should be congruent with that of a professional. Lannin and Scott (2013) agreed and felt it is important to acknowledge the rapid changes in digital technology, but also stressed the importance of keeping to the ethics and values of the profession.

***Lessons learned.*** One of the most interesting findings in this study is the awareness professionals have when it comes to navigating SNSs. Awareness comes as a result of watching others, which allows the professionals to either mimic or steer clear of the digital behavior being observed. The premise of Social Learning Theory is that learning takes place as a result of watching the behaviors of others. As a person witnesses the behaviors of others, new behaviors develop as a result of watching others within the social environment (Bandura, 1986). A key finding among family life educators and social workers is their ability to observe other people's digital behavior and make modifications to their own online behavior. Watching and hearing the experiences of other professionals, regardless of whether these people are in the same discipline, or not, allows professionals to learn about online experiences. Some of the lessons learned center on professional image and potential consequences of inappropriate digital behavior.

Professionals report that as they interface on SNSs, they notice behaviors of what they feel are unbecoming to a professional's image such as using profanity, inappropriate pictures or videos, racially biased jokes or slurs, and heated discussions surrounding religion and politics. Professionals observe that individuals can be reprimanded or fired based on their online activity regardless if they are off the clock, similar to what Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan and Fullmer (2013) reported. Posting too much identifying information about a client, spending too much time online while at work, bad-mouthing an employer or a co-worker, or being seen in compromising situations are just some of the scenarios shared by participants. Each of these examples provides fodder for professionals to acquire new behaviors instead of following in the footsteps of others.

Learning also takes place by 'creeping' or 'Googling' clients, co-workers, employers, and potential new employees. Clinton, Silverman, and Brendel (2010) referred to any type of searching done online as "Googling" regardless if it is done via SNSs or through a search engine. Professionals admit to searching online in the hopes of finding useful information. According to recent articles from similar professions such as psychology or psychiatry, 'creeping' on clients is not unusual. In fact, anywhere from approximately 27% to almost 98% of people from these related fields at one time or another searched out information on a client or potential client (Asay & Lal, 2014; Clinton, Silverman, & Brendel, 2010). This is significant in that rarely do people let the client know of the online search. The field of human services is becoming acutely aware of ethical challenges surrounding the use of digital media.

*Healthy paranoia.* Whether it is because of observing the digital behavior of another professional or simply because professionals themselves are 'creeping' on clients, professionals are acutely aware of the fact someone could quite possibly be monitoring their online or offline



behavior (Clinton et al., 2010). Professionals in this study appear to have developed a *healthy paranoia* as a result of being monitored. In essence, the professional never knows who is watching and what someone might do with the information. For most, this creates an opportunity to self-modulate his or her online behavior. This awareness is not seen as creating an unhealthy level of mistrust causing the digital behavior of the professional to be debilitated. Quite the contrary, professionals for the most part, keep using SNSs but appear to be more mindful of their digital behavior. For them, the benefits of using SNSs far outweigh any costs or consequences. In order to counterbalance those costs, the professionals generate their own rules to manage the potential consequences and adjust their digital behavior.

***Digital and non-digital natives' differences.*** Interestingly enough, in this study, participants' digital status does not seem to affect the ways in which SNSs are used. Unlike the data found in other studies (Cekada, 2012; Gu et al., 2013; Zickuhr, 2011; Zimmerman, 2012), non-digital natives tend to use SNSs on a regular basis for personal use similarly to digital natives. One of the main differences is the type of SNSs being used. Non-digital natives favor Facebook while digital natives are more apt to use a variety of SNSs.

The most interesting finding when looking at cohort effects is the perceptions each group had about each other. Digital natives feel non-digital natives shy away from any form of technology or are slow to warm up to its uses and have no restraint to what is posted. Digital natives are perceived by non-natives as being "addicted," unable to be without an Internet connection, and also to have poor boundaries with posting. However, self-reports from the participants do not substantiate either set of assumptions. Ironically, both groups identify the importance of having a professional appearance both on- and offline, regardless of whether the professional is on or off the clock.

***Role differences.*** While the intent of this study was not to compare family life educators to social workers, one finding is worth mentioning. Family life educators report more often the need to be portrayed as a professional. Developing a brand is significant for this group. Marketing themselves by listing their degree and credentials, area of expertise and distributing solid research based information often does this,. This is true whether they are using SNSs for personal or professional use. It is important for CFLEs to depict themselves in a positive and credible light and this is done in an openly transparent manner. The opposite is true for social workers. Identification as a professional is more likely to be subtle and focus more so on how they conduct themselves on- and offline.

Role definition plays a part in how the professional connects with clients and uses SNSs. Family life educators and social workers alike are concerned with working with and building healthy families. Yet, how this work is accomplished and operationalized is very different between these two professions (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Myers-Walls et al. (2011) emphasized when discussing the various roles, time orientation of services impacted when the professional intersected with the client. In this study, the family life educators tended to focus in the primary and secondary prevention categories, whereas interventions by social workers usually are found in secondary and tertiary prevention. Thus, it makes sense that family life educators are more likely to want to have a professional presence online. This is a strategy for being proactive in prevention education. Social workers with a master's degree are more likely to work in secondary or tertiary categories while those with only a bachelor's degree are found to work only in the tertiary prevention category. Because services begin after issues have surfaced, the need for a more online public appearance prior to the encounter is not necessary. However,

after services begin, behaving professionally on and offline becomes critical as does securing one's privacy.

### **Johari Window**

The Johari Window provides a way to understand the level of transparency professionals have when interacting with the digital culture (Chang et al., 2012). The Johari Window uses feedback and self-disclosure to bring balance to effective communication. One finding of this study is in the level of self-awareness and opportunity for feedback participants have with an online professional or personal presence. Feedback comes from employers, co-workers, clients, friends, and family. Some do not realize until an incident occurs that their online activity is not necessarily as private as anticipated. Others see the posts of 'friends' online and make conscious decisions to provide feedback to these 'friends' about the observed online behavior. In either scenario, what is hidden becomes public. Once the individual becomes more attuned to the blind spots and undiscovered areas, these quadrants decrease in size, providing a way for the professional to change his or her online behavior (Chang et al., 2012; South, 2007).

### **Implications for Research**

**'Connect'**. Maslow (1968) stated that a fundamental need for people is in belonging and is only achieved after the first two fundamental needs were met: basic needs and safety. In thinking about digital communication, 'connecting' is often referred to as a way to establish or maintain a relationship with another person, group, or organization. Professionals find that having the ability to 'connect' is advantageous to not only the personal self, but the professional self as well. However, findings also indicate that a professional often joins or sets up an account to a certain SNS or establishes a 'connection' to various SNSs even when the personal desire is not to do so. Peer pressure (desire to belong) takes precedent over personal choice. This is also

significant and warrants future research about how the professional safeguards his or her privacy in order to establish some semblance of safety. If this is accurate, then the need to ‘connect’ overrides the need for safety, altering what Maslow felt were a person’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1968).

***Digital Status.*** Digital natives and non-digital natives did not reveal any significant differences in how they use SNSs for professional use. Mattison (2013) acknowledged when it comes to technology use, digital natives were not the only ones using it on a regular basis. Since 2005, non-digital native technology use has increased. This is noteworthy because the assumption is that digital natives are more likely to be using SNSs in practice far more frequently than non-digital natives simply because of their familiarity to technology (Prensky, 2001a; Zimmerman, 2012). However, this is not the case in this study. So the question to ask is whether or not a person’s digital status should be defined strictly by age, or should it include personality, experiences, technological access (Gu et al., 2013), and whether or not it is being used for personal or professional use. If digital natives are supposed to be more technologically savvy, then the expectation would be digital natives would be using SNSs more in practice. In this study, this is not found to be true. However, it is also known that agencies in this study are underutilizing SNSs in practice. Future research might explore the digital status of the administration of human services agencies and whether or not there is a correlation to utilization of SNSs and status.

***Impact of posts on self.*** Another potential area for future study is in the impact of the posts on the personal self. For some professionals, seeing the posts of others has the potential to greatly impact how the professionals feel about themselves. Utz (2010) proposed online self presentation is usually done in a positive fashion. Profiles of the participants and ‘friends’ along

with number of ‘friends’ contributes to the impressions a person made. In this study, for one family life educator, the impact was so great, she deactivated her SNSs. Future research using a more in-depth interview could explore deeper reasons for why a person’s ego strength is weakened as a result of what is seen online.

### ***Implications for Practice***

For the most part, social workers and family life educators are ambivalent about being held responsible for online behavior while off the clock. Not one participant referenced the profession’s code of ethics in regards to being held responsible for his or her online behavior while off duty. According to 4.03 Private Conduct of the NASW Code of Ethics (2008), “Social workers should not permit their private conduct to interfere with their ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities.” In addition, 4.06 Misrepresentation of this same code states:

*(a) Social workers should make clear distinctions between statements made and actions engaged in as a private individual and as a representative of the social work profession, a professional social work organization, or the social worker’s employing agency.*

*(b) Social workers who speak on behalf of professional social work organizations should accurately represent the official and authorized positions of the organizations (NASW Code of Ethic, 2008).*

This is significant for a couple of reasons. The code alludes to the fact that a social worker is still obligated to be a professional regardless if he or she is on or off the clock. Furthermore, identifying oneself as a social worker or by place of employment comes with certain expectations for professional behavior. Being mindful not to discuss client information, bad mouthing one’s agency or co-workers, using profanity, and lewd or sexually explicit content are just some of the behaviors unsuitable for a professional (Duncan-Daston, 2013; Lannin &

Scott, 2013). In addition, the professional needs to be mindful of potential liability and licensure issues as a result of using SNSs in practice.

Much like social workers, certified family life educators are responsible for upholding the code of ethics and ethical guidelines of the profession. While these do not specifically address technology use per se, these documents do provide guidelines to help direct ethical professional behavior (NCFR, Preamble, para. 3, 2012). I find no less than 10 ethical principles in which technology use could impact the delivery of services for family life educators. Two examples found, Relationships with Parents and Families ethical principles 8 and 12 state, *“I will communicate openly and truthfully about the nature and extent of services provided (#8). I will create data privacy and confidentiality guidelines respectful of family members and protective of their legal rights” (#12)* (NCFR, 2012). Certified family life educators are to take responsibility for managing a client’s private information and for informing the client about how they plan to deliver services to and for the client. Family life educators should go to great lengths to secure that the client’s [digital] information is not made public and be aware of informed consent issues. Family life educators, who are mindful of the ethical principles and can also transfer these guidelines to the digital media world, will be able to use SNSs to promote positive healthy living. The skills and practices of these ethical principles used offline can be transferred to online practices. These principles center on communication, privacy, professional development, networking, and establishing both personal and professional boundaries. Family life educators are obligated to make adjustments to their professional practice when incorporating technology use.

***Need for policies.*** Due to the ubiquitous nature of SNSs, they will continue to pose certain issues around critical ethical issues. Managing informed consent, dual relationships,

confidentiality, documentation, managing fragile individuals and families, legalities of practicing across state lines, and competence of the professional are just a few of the ethical issues that are creating a hotbed of discussion among professionals (Reamer, 2014).

In the absence of actual guidelines for SNS use, professionals develop their own guidelines for practice. Much like the fields of family life education and social work, other disciplines such as psychology and psychiatry are struggling to make sense out of SNS use and its impact on professionals and clients (Clinton et al., 2010; Kimball & Kim, 2013; Lannin & Scott, 2013). Reamer (2014) felt professionals needed to manage risk due to the number of ethical issues technology has created. Fortunately, the Association of Social Work Boards is expected to release new technology standards for social workers early next year. These much needed technology standards will provide newly defined standards of care for using technology in practice, taking away the need for professionals to develop or continue with their own guidelines. However, this also means the bar will have been raised, making it necessary for social workers to begin operationalizing these standards of care in practice (Reamer, 2014).

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

A strength of this study is the use of technology. Skype and/or Zoom were used for almost all of the interviews for family life educators and with a few social worker interviews. Having this capability, allowed me to gather data in a timely manner and without forfeiting field face-to-face observations and field research (Thorne, 1994). Having the ability to see the participant, allowed me to be observant of non-verbal cues as well as verbal communications (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1994).

Another strength of this study is that some of the findings have also been documented from other disciplines such as psychology and psychiatry. In both of these fields, ethical digital

behavior for both personal and professional use is a growing concern. Conceptualizing best practices for ethical digital behavior is being sought (Harris & Robinson Kurpius, 2014; Lannin & Scott, 2013). The findings from other human services fields bring credibility to this study's findings. Credibility also is achieved by bringing something new and different to the fields of family life education and social work.

In the interviews, participants were asked whether or not there were existing agency policies on employee use of SNSs. Only three social workers and two family life educators were able to provide a copy of the agency's technology or social media use policy. While a small number of policies were submitted, this information provided valuable data triangulation. This is consistent with the literature search that only approximately 22% to 27% of agencies actually had current social media policies (Carr & Maier, 2013).

Finally, one of the biggest strengths of this exploratory study is in its phenomenological approach. This method allowed me to get at the lived experiences of family life educators and social workers in order to ascribe meaning to how SNSs are being used in practice. Interpretative phenomenology methodology seeks to discover information-rich data through in-depth interviews and sought meaning to the phenomenon. This methodology also provided a mechanism for me to take an active and personal role in the process, recognizing the importance of self-reflection to explore for researcher bias (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Researcher bias is always at the forefront of any study. Because I work in the field and also am a user of SNSs, I am aware of the potential for bias. I employed my major professors and faculty within my department at Missouri Western State University in identifying potential bias.



One of the limits to this study is with geographical make-up of the sample. Social workers selected were primarily from the Northwest Missouri and Northeast Kansas regions. While family life educators did comprise a larger portion of the country and Canada, no participant from the Silicon Valley or the Pacific Northwest (seen as the hub of technology) responded. Possible future research might be to solicit participants from these regions to see if their exposure to what is perceived as a more technology savvy area would influence how SNSs are impacting practice for these professionals.

It is possible that the type of employment setting in which participants work might have influenced the results. The expectation would be that government funded agencies might have more stringent protocols for its employees as compared to non-profit agencies.

Another limitation to this study was the participant's ability to self-select by responding to the email solicitation. It is possibly the people who responded to the request were already aware of potential issues of SNS use and could have impacted these results. Only participants who responded to the email request were asked the Pre-Interview Survey Questions.

## **Conclusion**

In recent years, SNSs have gained popularity and continue to evolve bringing along a host of opportunities for the human services arena. Communication has gone from a private setting to an open and often public forum (Duncan-Saston et. al, 2013). Anything posted online is leaving a digital footprint, even if it is against a person's volition. Still, the drive to 'connect' has far greater appeal than not. Professionals who use SNSs have been forced to navigate these with little guidance even though human service agencies expect employees to have a working knowledge of ethical technology use (Reamer, 2014).

This study has highlighted how family life educators and social workers were using SNSs in practice. I began this study talking about my experience with using technology in practice. Much like the professionals discussed in this study, unbeknownst to me at the time, I put in place ethical guidelines to guide my technology use with this particular client. However, had I known the legal and liability implications of using electronic communications with clients, I might have created even tighter guidelines.

So much of the current literature on SNSs is focused on ethical and risk management issues for practice. These are very timely and necessary elements for practice. Professionals should be celebrated for finding ways to protect themselves and for practicing self-care within these virtual boundaries (Kimball & Kim, 2013) in the midst of an ever-changing digital society. Turning back the clock and going to a time prior to the Internet is not feasible. Reamer (2014) stated, “The genie is out of the lamp,” and I think it is safe to say, “She is not going back in!”

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## Appendix A - Recruitment Email

Dear Human Service Provider:

I am a doctoral candidate pursuing a degree in Family Studies at Kansas State University. I am conducting a qualitative study on how social networking sites are impacting the human services arena and the delivery of these services. I am interested in talking to professionals who work within this sector and would be willing to share their perceptions about how they use social networking sites both personally and professionally. This study has been approved by the K-State IRB.

This email has been sent to the National Council on Family Relations Certified Family Life Educators' and Missouri Western State University Social Work listservs. Permission has been obtained from both institutions. My study involves selecting participants who meet certain educational and age criteria. Participants will be selected using a pre-screening telephone survey. Once selected, participants will be asked to participate in a confidential interview.

If you are interested in talking to me further about being a potential participant, please respond to this email by providing the following information.

Name:

Email address:

Phone number

Address:

Thank you for your consideration,

Pam Clary

816-271-4341

[pclary@ksu.edu](mailto:pclary@ksu.edu)

## Appendix B - Pre-Interview Survey Screening Questions

1. Please provide the following information:
  - a. Where are you employed?
  - b. What is your title?
  - c. Please list your educational degree(s)
  - d. Are you licensed or certified in your field?
  - e. Years in the field
  - f. In what year were you born?
  
2. Do you access social networking sites for:
  - a. Personal Use:        Yes\_\_\_\_\_    No:\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Professional Use:    Yes\_\_\_\_\_    No:\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C - The Interview Guide

During this interview, I would like to ask you about your perceptions of how SNSs are being used within the human service arena.

1. You told me during our phone conversation, you were employed at \_\_\_\_\_ and your title is \_\_\_\_\_; can you tell me about your job at this agency?
  - How long have you been at this agency in this position?
  - What type of clientele do you serve through this agency?
  - What do you see as your primary job responsibilities?
  - Describe a typical day.
  
2. During our phone conversation, you also told me you had a degree(s) in \_\_\_\_\_; how do you see your education as being a good fit for the human service arena?
  - How did you come to work in human services?
  - How did your degree(s) prepare you for working within this field?
  - What do you see as your role as a person working in the field of human services?
  - How many years have you been working in human services?

(If born prior to 1982)

3. How do you define human services?
  - How has this definition changed since you began working in the field?
  - In what ways has the field of human services changed (if any) since you first began working in the field?
  - How is the delivery of services similar or different now than when you first began working in the field?

(If born after 1982)

4. How do you define human services?
  - How has this definition changed since you began working in the field?
  - How do you think it has changed over the last 30 years?
  - In what ways do you see human services as changed (if any) since you first began working?
  - How is the delivery of services similar or different now than when you first began working in the field?
  
5. SNSs are an online network of individuals who are connected by a person's individualized webpage. I am interested in knowing how you would define social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, MySpace).
  - What do you see as the purpose of SNSs?
  - Who are the people accessing SNSs?
  - What are the more popular SNSs being utilized?

6. During the pre-screening interview, you told me you used SNSs for both personal and professional use. I would be interested in learning more about how you use SNSs in your personal or private life.
  - Thinking about an average day, how much time do you spend using some type of SNS for personal use?
  - What are your favorite SNSs to access when “off-the-clock?”
  - What are some of the things you enjoy about using SNSs?
  - How does privacy affect your SNS utilization?
  - How do you determine what information you share online when using SNSs for personal use?
  - In your opinion, what criteria do you use before deciding to ‘friend,’ ‘connect with,’ ‘accept an invitation to connect,’ or ‘follow’ someone?
  - What types of experiences come to mind as a result of using SNSs personally?
  
7. What is your understanding of how SNSs are being used at your agency?
  - How are SNSs being used within this agency?
  - What differences do you see between how degreed employees and non-degreed employees utilize SNSs?
  - What differences have you noticed for professionals who have been in the field more than 5 years as compared to those who have not in regards to SNS utilization?
  - How does the professional’s job position or title, lend itself to using or accessing SNSs?
  - When thinking about a regular work day, what time of day do employees access SNSs more often?
  - What type of benefits does this agency receive by having access to SNSs?
  - How are the privacy settings handled at this agency?
  
8. You told me earlier that this agency serves \_\_\_\_\_ clientele; I am interested in understanding how you think this particular population utilizes SNSs.
  - How is the clientele best served by using SNSs?
  - What do you see as the primary purpose for this population to utilize SNSs?
  - Provide examples of how clients may be utilizing SNSs.
  
9. During the pre-screening interview, you told me you used SNSs for both personal and professional use. I would be interested in learning more about how you use SNSs in your professional life.
  - Thinking about an average day, how much time do you spend using some type of SNS while at work?
  - How often do you access SNSs while at work?
  - Because you have a professional degree, how does this label impact how you use SNSs?
  - How are you able to use SNSs with the clients you serve?
  - How does your SNS utilization affect privacy for your clients?
  - What types of SNS forums do you use with clients?

- How are SNSs utilized differently between you and someone who does not have the same job description as you?
  - What are some of the things you enjoy about using SNSs while at work?
  - How do you determine what information you share online when using SNSs for professional use?
  - What is your opinion on maintaining a professional presence on a personal SNS account?
  - What types of experiences come to mind as a result of using SNSs professionally?
  - In your opinion, what criteria do you use before deciding to ‘friend’ or ‘follow’ a *former* client?
  - What if the “friend” is a *current* client? How does the criteria change on whether to accept this person as a ‘friend’ or ‘follow’ them?
10. I am curious about what you have heard regarding the SNS experiences of other professionals.
- How does a person’s age influence SNS access and usage?
  - In your opinion, how possible is it for a person to maintain his or her professional identity while using a personal SNS account?
  - What type of online behavior would you expect to see from a professional who is “off-the-clock,” if you were allowed to access his or her posts?
  - In your opinion, are there certain things a professional should consider before posting something online?
  - Can you give me examples of how professionals are using SNSs with the clients they serve?
  - Can you think of any examples where you felt the need to provide feedback to another professional about his or her online behavior? If so, please explain.
11. What can you tell me about what your agency’s viewpoint on using SNSs for work?
- Have these suggestions been written down formally?
  - If so, how long ago have these suggestions (policies) been in place?
12. Based on your experiences, if you were going to write a policy or guidelines for your workplace regarding the use of SNSs, tell me what you would include in this policy or guidelines?
- What should be considered as a policy is written?
  - Whose input should be considered when writing this policy?
  - How would you inform the employees of this new policy?
13. As we wrap up, is there anything else that you would like to add in regards to anything that we have discussed during this interview?