PREVENTATIVE STEPS SOCIAL NETWORKS, SUCH AS FACEBOOK, TAKE AGAINST SEX TRAFFICKING

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by

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B.A, Southern Illinois University, 2019

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Science

Department of Mass Communications and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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PREVENTATIVE STEPS SOCIAL NETWORKS, SUCH AS FACEBOOK, TAKE AGAINST SEX TRAFFICKING

by

Alliyah Bridges

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in the field of Professional Media & Media Management

Approved by:

Bridget Lescelius, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
December 2, 2020
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I’d like to thank to my Professor, Bridget Lescelius, on her dedication in helping me with this research. Thank you to my family for supporting me on this journey, and my husband for being their when I needed him most tackling sensitive subjects.
DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the strong voices that fought for their voice to be heard. May they continue to strive to seeking freedom.
PREFACE

The increasing use of social media enables predators to seek out and recruit victims through social networking sites. The overall goal is outsmarting their manipulation on users by understanding and exposing their techniques to families and communities.

Social media network, in particular Facebook, are a feeding ground for sexual predators with the use of media as a tool to lure, recruit, and control victims. Knowing the process of recruiting for online sex trafficking will protect users and be more aware of the dangers on social media. With a sex trafficking lawsuit pending against Facebook, the social media network needs to be more proactive in providing better security for its users or risk legal ramifications.
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CHAPTER 1

SEX TRAFFICKING IN AMERICA THROUGH FACEBOOK

Having a giant social media platform, such as Facebook, has become heavily dominated by its users which creates many opportunities for people to connect and reach one another. Its rapid appeal and accessibility have made users around the world develop friendships, relationships, groups, and more. However, with roughly 2.5 billion monthly users worldwide, there are concerns about the ease of accessibility of users’ data and the implications of privacy amongst users.

Sex trafficking is defined by the non-profit organization, Shared Hope International, as the “[event] when someone uses force, fraud, or coercion to cause a commercial sex act with an adult or causes a minor to commit a commercial sex act” (What is Sex Trafficking, Shared Hope International, 2020). The illicit industry thrives most successfully through manipulating and abusing victims through a social media network. According to Shared Hope International, the common age a child enters the sex trafficking world is between 14 to 16 years old.

With the increasing use of social media among adolescents, sexual predators are becoming craftier in targeting victims for sex trafficking. By establishing an online relationship and other grooming techniques, sexual predators are manipulating their interactions on social media platforms.

If Facebook were to monitor specific actions such as falsifying identity and asking for sexual online conduct this will perhaps deter and stop the use of online sex trafficking. Social media is a constant evolving system that doesn’t have all of the protection it needs. Facebook leads the world in amount of internet users, and in this writer’s opinion, it needs to be on the forefront in confronting this issue.
The increasing use of social media enables predators to seek out and recruit victims through social networking sites. The overall goal is outsmarting their manipulation of users by understanding and exposing their techniques. Technology, in particular social media networks such as Facebook, becomes a bigger risk to younger females. Social networks like Facebook are a feeding ground for sexual predators with the use of media as a tool to lure, recruit, and control victims.

The need for social platforms being proactive on this issue is paramount. The social stigma, misrepresentation, and misinformation about sex trafficking leaves victims to be unidentified and voiceless. Providing assistance to current and potential victims can break the hold the sex traffickers have on them. The places sexual predators are finding their victims are at schools, bars, or inside homes among family. However, the biggest avenue for sexual predators discovering their next target is social media platforms.

Facebook needs to be aware of these techniques and monitor them in order to protect their users and its brand. Knowing the process of recruiting for online sex trafficking will protect users and be more aware of the dangers on social media.

Recruitment for sex trafficking has been reported with victims interacting on Facebook first. According to a 2018 research report, “A Roadmap For Systems and Industries to Prevent and Disrupt Human Trafficking”, from the nonprofit organization Polaris written by Brittany Anthony, 250 potential victims were recruited on Facebook. According to the site, “Facebook pages are just some of many ways commercial front sex trafficking venues enhance the guise of their businesses legitimacy online and in their communities” (A Roadmap For Systems and Industries to Prevent and Disrupt Human Trafficking, Anthony, 2018). Anthony also recorded
many survivors’ testimonies, and they said they were first recruited into sex trafficking through the groups on Facebook.

From the report, the survivors were surveyed and questioned on which social media platforms were the most popular among sex traffickers. Out of the 127 respondents, 37 percent reported that Facebook was used most. Sexual predators lurking on social media platforms have a likely pattern of falsifying their identity, using suggestive adult content with minors, and coercing victims with blackmail and threats.

In April 2018, the Allow States and Victims Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA-SESTA) was signed by President Donald Trump Jr. with the hopes of stopping sex trafficking of minors. According to the Congress.gov website, the FOSTA-SESTA holds sites accountable for any knowledge and distribution of promoting prostitution and sale of sex trafficking. This amendment law is based on the current Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act.

According to the online website Electronic Frontier Foundation, Section 230 was made in 1996 with the intention of protecting freedom of expression and innovation on the Internet. From the website, it explains how websites would not be liable for their users’ actions or content, and it gives freedom of not censoring (eff.org). The law has protected websites in the past because of users’ actions and the content posted on its websites.

However, the new amendment law will change the current Section 230. The new amendment claims to not provide legal protection to “websites that unlawfully promote and facilitate prostitution and…the bill defines ‘participation in a venture’ to mean knowingly assisting, supporting, or facilitating a sex trafficking violation” (Congress.gov). With upholding the FOSTA-SESTA, social media companies, such as Facebook, may be held responsible for not securing its users against sex traffickers.
Moreover, at present, Facebook has a legal obligation on the issue equal to a moral standard. With a 2018 lawsuit filed against Facebook by a human trafficking survivor, the social media giant must face critique and seek to resolve this lawsuit. A spokeswoman from Facebook delivered a written statement, in summary, of how the network abides by the law and has a partnership with children’s advocacy group. This lawsuit can have reputable damages to any social media company to the point where it can destroy and tarnish the company’s trust, reputation, and hold them lawfully liable.

The lawsuit came forward on the news in October. The online news article, “Lawsuit Accuses Facebook of Enabling Human Traffickers”, from NBC at Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas written by Juan Lozano. In the article, Lozano reported that a human trafficking survivor is suing the social media platform for “[providing human traffickers an unrestricted way to ‘stalk, exploit, recruit, groom… and extort children into the sex trade’]. In 2012, The unidentified survivor was 15 years old after a sex trafficker recruited her from Facebook and sexually assaulted her.

The lawsuit, in summary, has claimed Facebook should be “held liable for the conduct of sex traffickers because the social media site has become the ‘first point of contact between sex traffickers and these children’” (Lawsuit Accuses Facebook of Enabling Human Traffickers, Lozano, 2018). This lawsuit has damaged the reputation of keeping its users safe and from being exploited. Should the lawsuit be found in the favor of the survivor, Facebook can face $1 million in damages and potential federal charges. The responsibility of any company would ensure that its users are well managed and refrain from any worry of sex traffickers abusing its website.

A New York Times online article, “Sex Trafficking via Facebook Sets Off a Lawyer’s Novel Crusade”, written by Jack Nicas, reported Facebook’s response to the lawsuit. The social media platform asked the Texas state judge to dismiss the lawsuit due to the immunity under
Section 230. Furthermore, a spokeswoman from Facebook reported that the company “has zero tolerance for any behavior or content that exploits children on our platform” (Sex Trafficking via Facebook Sets Off a Lawyer’s Novel Crusade, Nicas, 2019). The ruling in favor of the victim can do reputable harm to the company and open a door for more social media platforms becoming more scrutinized and monitored.

The Houston lawyer on case, Annie McAdams, is taking on the social media giant and making a point with the case. In the article, McAdams “argues that her case is about what Facebook didn’t do to protect its users” (Sex Trafficking via Facebook Sets Off a Lawyer’s Novel Crusade, Nicas, 2019). Her recommendation for the company was to require better restriction on interactions between adults and children, and there would need to be more warnings for people at risk of trafficking.

Another lawyer, Carrie Goldberg, reported on the article on her agreement with McAdams. In the article, Goldberg understands if Facebook is reprimanded, “it could force companies to make their sites safer” (Sex Trafficking via Facebook Sets Off a Lawyer’s Novel Crusade, Nicas, 2019). The trial date is set within 2021 which will most likely be held in the Texas Supreme Court.

This has sown a deeper dilemma with the social network. An analysis report from the Tech Transparency Project (2020) concluded that Facebook is used by predators in the attempts of sexually abusing children. The analysis details cases where sexual predators have lured users—most were underage—into engaging sexual activity leading them into the life of sex trafficking and exploitation of children. In the Tech Transparency Project analysis, the social network has promised to make efforts in combatting against child exploitation by building sophisticated systems in locating the crime.
Since the FOSTA-SESTA law, there has been an increasing number of cases in which Facebook reported child exploitation; this suggests Facebook may be have become more proactive due to the potential for litigation (Sexual Exploitation of Children on Facebook, 2020). However, from the Tech Transparency Project analysis report (2020), a customized code was scanned on texts from U.S Attorney’s website of the Department of Justice for any mentions of Facebook; they were able to identify 366 individual cases involving alleged sexual predators using the social network for child exploitation which included distribution of sexual abuse imagery, recruiting children, and sex trafficking. In majority of the cases, the social network had not provided any initial alert to the authorities.

In fact, only 9% of the 366 cases were initiated because of Facebook or the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (which received cyber tips from Facebook) reported them to authorities, and thus raising questions about the effectiveness of Facebook’s monitoring of criminal activity targeting children (Sexual Exploitation of Children on Facebook, 2020). While the social network has made its own attempts to curve the criminal activity on its website, it is clear that a new strategy needs to become more effective.

There has already been a recorded history of distrust between Facebook and its users. According to the online news article from the New York Times, “California Sues Facebook for Documents in Privacy Investigation”, written by Cecilia Kang and David McCabe, Facebook had an investigation due to alleged resistance on providing answers and questions on the company’s privacy practices. Having concerns on alleged mistreatment on users’ information and privacy has made the social media platform questionable. If there are concerns on privacy, the sex trafficking lawsuit compromises the integrity of Facebook.
Another instance where users feel unease when using social media has been the overall misuse of data and collection of personal information. From the online Pew Research Center, the article, “Americans’ Complicated Feelings About Social Media in an Era of Privacy Concerns”, written by Lee Rainie, users are concerned with increasing use of social media and the dangers that come along with it.

From the article, research collected from a 2014 survey explain “91% of Americans ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that people have lost control over how personal information is collected and used by all kinds of entities” (Americans’ Complicated Feelings About Social Media in an Era of Privacy Concerns, Rainie, 2020). The fear that these users have, the concerns of Facebook misusing its users’ information, and the lawsuit can drive users away from the social media platform and deter others too.

Users want social media companies stepping up to take on the role of being responsible and accountable. According to the article, “95 of social media users were ‘very confident’ that the social media companies would protect their data” (Americans’ Complicated Feelings About Social Media in an Era of Privacy Concerns, Rainie, 2020). The lack of trust in social media platforms hurts brands like Facebook, and it creates a fear and unsafe environment on the platform.

It is known that Facebook has the largest number of users in the world. Dr. Vanessa Bouché gave a detailed report, “Survivor Insights: The Role of Technology in Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking”, on how sex traffickers are using social media platforms to lure, recruit, and exploit users. The report explained that Facebook is the number one site mentioned in being used and accessed for sex traffickers. Sex trafficked victims, who reported their experiences, saw that Facebook had advertisements for trafficking with an average of 5 posts a day.
Bouché reported that 70% of buyers of sex trafficking were in communication via Facebook. This is very problematic because “Facebook not only provided an unrestricted platform for these sex traffickers to target children, but it also cloaks the traffickers with creditability” (Lawsuit Accuses Facebook Of Enabling Human Traffickers, Lozano, 2018). Sex traffickers are using the social media platform to increase their activity.

At the University of Southern California, a 2018 research report, “Human Trafficking Online: The Role of Social Networking Sites and Online Classifieds”, written by Mark Latonero detailed the methods of understanding the relationship between domestic human trafficking and online technologies. His method of approach included literature reviews, field research, and in-depth interviews.

Based from his report, he attested news reports are “connecting Facebook to cases of human trafficking, as traffickers use social networking sites to target victims and advertise their sexual service” (Human Trafficking Online: The Role of Social Networking Sites and Online Classifieds, Latonero, 2018). The report goes into detail on how prevention efforts can diminish the usage of trafficking victims via online. Facebook has made successful efforts in addressing the issue; however, sex traffickers continuously use the social media platform to communicate with potential victims.

A way of managing and combatting the issue of sex trafficking on Facebook is the terminology used in its term of use. For example, “Facebook prohibits registered sex offenders from using its site” (Human Trafficking Online: The Role of Social Networking Sites and Online Classifieds, Latonero, 2018). However, other sites specifically state that human trafficking, child pornography, and prostitution are not allowed.
For instance, the website Backpage.com has direct terms on their site curbing any human trafficking: “posting any solicitation directly or in ‘coded’ fashion for any illegal service exchanging sexual favors for money or other valuable consideration” (Human Trafficking Online: The Role of Social Networking Sites and Online Classifieds, Latonero, 2018). Terminology that has direct language will affect and prohibit any illicit activity that may occur on Facebook.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Using a quantitative method approach for this study seemed more adept due to the fact that past researchers used the same method of using a survey to discover their findings. It made more sense going into the research to rely on this repetitive approach of conducting an online questionnaire as opposed to other methodologies. Having an online questionnaire was the most cost effective and accessible for participants to respond. The 19-question questionnaire was conducted through Google Forms with 60 college-aged respondents between October 18\textsuperscript{th}, 2020 to November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2020. The sample was taken students among working in the Undergraduate Admissions office, Saluki Ambassador Program, and distributed among students with access to Desire to Learn database. The limitations of the method were taken into account.

This is a convenience sample of college students at Southern Illinois university Carbondale. It is to be considered at this is a pilot study for academic research. Part of the questionnaire included open ended questions about knowing their habits of social media and explain their interactions and experiences. Other questions included closed questions on the various topics about what popular social media platforms are used. The data was generated from the Google Forms automatically and calculated the responses. Major finding and majority of the responses were sifted out of the data.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

From the respondents from the questionnaire, the results were alarming when it came to question on how to report sexual predators on social media apps. From the Figure 1 below, out of the 60 respondents, 50% have answered that they did not know the steps needed to take. This can be inferred to why there is great lack of report of sexual misconduct on Facebook. If users are not knowledgeable about how to report misconduct, it needs to be addressed by the social network in making the information easier for users to obtain.

Figure 1, Reporting Sexual Predators

Another result from the questionnaire was to give their opinion on the knowing how to use Internet safety guidelines. 41% of respondents claimed that they were either unaware of the safety measures needed on the Internet or wasn’t sure how effective they were. The lack of trust and knowledge on Internet safety and were not reporting on social media apps should be a concern for Facebook. These are their users, and it matters that they are all clear on what to do if they encounter sexual predators on their website.
In order for users on Facebook to feel safe on its network, it’s important for users’ safety to be protected which also included their privacy. The survey resulted with 55% of respondents claiming that they do not feel that their privacy is protected within social media apps. Five respondents gave their opinion by stating they are afraid of their accounts being hacked and watched over by people who would take advantage of them. It should be of the importance of any social media network, including Facebook, in ensuring that their user's privacy is not at risk.

When asked if the respondents have ever interacted with strangers on social media apps, 40% of the results with having communication. They were then prompted to continue giving clarity to which social media apps the interaction taken place.

![Figure 2, Strangers on Social Media](image)

As seen down above on Figure 2, Facebook is the highest result of the interactions people use when it comes to strangers. This becomes a great risk factor because of the potential opportunity to be in contact with sex traffickers. They can be very charismatic and disguise themselves into something that they are not. If strangers befriend people on social media
networks, the importance and responsibility fall on both the user and the social network in making sure that they verify strangers and protect themselves from harm. With the added nature of sexual predators lurking on social networks, privacy and safety has to be better communicated from Facebook to users.
CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION

What can the social media platform, Facebook, do in combatting and preventing these illicit activities from happening? Getting ahead in confronting sex trafficking may restore the faith which was lost in Facebook. Outlining suggestive steps and preventive measures may assure that users, particularly minors, can use Facebook without worries of sexual traffickers attacking them. Perhaps developing a media strategy campaign on the recognizing the signs of sex trafficking will restore faith and integrity into the social network. Other measures would ensure Facebook takes a strong stance against sexual trafficking and protecting its younger audience.

On the social media platform’s website, Facebook has a helpful guide for its users should they encounter questionable behavior.

From their help center Abuse Resource sub-section, Facebook explained if users become in contact with someone that may be participating in human/sex trafficking. According to the page, users are to contact 911 or local law enforcement and report the content to the website (Facebook.com). The page also mentions the partnership with Polaris and the National Human Trafficking Hotline in providing resources for victims and survivors of human trafficking.

They continue to list resource website links from different countries with their contact information. While this resource is great and necessary, the website lacks a preventive approach. On the surface level, most of the information provided is available elsewhere on search engines. Facebook would need a catered design that prevents sex traffickers from abusing the website and recruiting members.
According to Bouché, “there is a significant amount of room for the technology industry to develop advanced and sophisticated tools to combat [domestic minor sex trafficking]”. For instance, developing advertisements for victims will help them be aware that help exists. This may increase the credibility of Facebook in recognizing the need of social awareness for sex trafficked victims.

By doing so, Facebook can be a leader on “improving visibility of help resources such as helplines on platforms known to be frequented by DMST victims could increase opportunities for exiting the life” (Survivor Insights: The Role of Technology in Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking, Bouché, 2018). With many technological resources, "Facebook has the technology to be able to potentially develop algorithms to look for the indicators and the red flags of potential [trafficking] exploitation and abuse” (Lawsuit Accuses Facebook Of Enabling Human Traffickers, Lozano, 2018). For example, Latonero reported on how Facebook has applied Microsoft’s PhotoDNA on its social networking site. The technology has the ability of locating and removing images of child pornography.

Another way Facebook can further its efforts is offering features and tools for accessing ongoing safety needs. Developing monitoring software catching common words, phrases, or patterns could help at-risk users. Similar to a language used for individuals considering and/or attempting suicide can be made for at-risk individuals for human trafficking and have messaging of the Human Trafficking National Hotline (A Roadmap For Systems and Industries to Prevent and Disrupt Human Trafficking, Anthony, 2018). Potentially, these measures, if in place, can ensure the social media platform is doing everything in their power in to protect its users and provide a safer and healthier environment for people to connect.
Using these examples will put forth a positive direction Facebook needs in diminishing sex traffickers recruiting victims. Identifying a few grooming techniques will be a necessary tool in combating against sex trafficking and protecting minors from this danger. Facebook’s image and brand have been shaken and questioned over the last few years because of the alleged misuse of data, privacy, and protection.

Defining a clear stance on issues such as combatting against sex trafficking could brand social media gives the platform, Facebook, the ability to develop credibility amongst its users. After having a lawsuit filed against them and questionable actions of misuse of users’ data, Facebook requires proactive approach in diminishing sexual trafficking activity on its platform. In order to protect future and current users, it is imperative for the social media platform set up protective blocks in order to stop sex trafficking.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

Sex traffickers are using social media to lure potential victims, and Facebook remains the largest social network that has most users. This became a breeding ground for sexual predators to disguise themselves and lie about their identity to recruit potential victims. They come in the form of being friendly online and building a relationship in order to gain their trust.

It is dangerous for users to be unaware of the potential threat of sexual trafficking on Facebook. The social network has tried to overcome this by setting features in place to deter the crime. However, there is still more to work to do. Facebook can be the leader on protecting its users by identifying key verbiage and prohibiting compromised photos online that indict trafficking. They have the technology to implement ideas that will make it harder for sex traffickers to be on their website.

The pending lawsuit against Facebook will test the social networks capability and responsibility of keeping its users safe from harm. However, if Facebook leads themselves as a proactive social network against sex trafficking, they may have hopes of gaining the trust back from its users.
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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

Hi, my name is Alliyah Bridges and I am M.S. Professional Media & Media Management graduate student with Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

The survey will be completed online. You must be 18 years old to do this survey. We encourage you to complete the survey in one sitting, which typically takes about 10 to 12 minutes. There are questions that may choose to not participate. You may skip any questions you are not comfortable answering.

The topic is providing feedback on the links between social media apps, privacy, and human trafficking within the United States. We will take all reasonable steps to protect your identity. Your identity and answers will be kept private from other third parties. After the end of this research, the record answers will be destroyed. The completion and return of this survey indicate voluntary consent to participate in this study.

If there are any questions about the survey or the research project, please feel free to reach out to Professor Bridget Lescelius at blescelius@siu.edu (618) 536-3361, or myself at abridges1031@siu.edu (708) 714-2965.

1. What is your age range?
   a. 18-20
   b. 20-22
   c. 22-24
   d. 24 and up

2. What level of education do you currently possess?
   a. High School Degree/GED or equivalent
b. Some college and university courses

c. Associate Degree

d. Bachelor’s Degree

e. Master’s Degree

f. Certification

g. Prefer not to answer/Don’t know

3. What is your current occupation?

____________________________________

4. If you use social media apps, what social media apps do you use the most?

   a. Facebook
   b. Instagram
   c. Snapchat
   d. Twitter
   e. Don’t Know/Don’t use
   f. Other__________________

5. If you use social media apps, how often do you use social it?

   a. Always
   b. Hourly
   c. Daily
   d. Weekly
   e. Never
   f. Don’t Know/No Opinion

6. Do you feel your privacy is protected with social media apps?
a. Yes (Please answer the following question.)

b. No (Please skip the following question.)

c. Maybe/No Opinion

7. If you do not feel your privacy is protected by social media apps, please briefly explain why.
_________________________________________________________________

8. Please check all the people that you interact with on social networks.

☐ Friends

☐ Family

☐ Co-Workers

☐ Strangers

☐ Everyone

☐ No One

☐ Prefer not to answer/Don’t know

9. Do you ever interact with strangers on social apps?

a. Yes (Please answer the following question.)

b. No (Please skip the following question.)

c. Don’t Know/No Opinion

10. If you have interacted with strangers on social media apps, what app did you use?

a. Facebook

b. Instagram

c. Twitter

d. Snapchat
e. Other _________

11. Have you been fooled by a stranger’s identity on a social media app?
   a. Yes (Please answer the following question.)
   b. No (Please skip the following question.)
   c. Maybe/Prefer not to answer

12. If you have been fooled by a stranger's identity on social media, what app did this take place?
   a. Facebook
   b. Instagram
   c. Twitter
   d. Snapchat
   e. Other _________

13. Has your identity been stolen or used be another person other than yourself on social networks?
   a. Yes (Please answer the following question.)
   b. No (Please skip the following question.)
   c. Maybe/No Opinion

14. If your identity has been stolen or used by another person other than yourself without permission, what social media apps were used?
   a. Facebook
   b. Instagram
   c. Twitter
   d. Snapchat
e. Other ________

15. Do you believe that social media apps have a responsibility to protect its users against sexual predators? Why or why not?

_______________________________________________________________________

16. With 5 being the highest, please rank the following gender identity that is at the highest risk to sexual predators on social networks. Write your rank on the provided line next to the trait. Least at risk 1 2 3 4 5 Most at Risk

   a. ___ Young women

   b. ___ Young men

   c. ___ Young LBGTQ+

17. Do you know how to report sexual predators on social networks?

   a. Yes

   b. No

   c. Maybe/No Opinion

18. Do you know Internet Safety guidelines (i.e. Keep Your Privacy Settings On, Keep Personal Information Professional and Limited, Be Careful What You Post, Never give out identifying information such as your name, home address, school name, or telephone number, etc.)?

   a. Yes

   b. No

   c. Maybe/No Opinion

19. Do you follow the Internet Safety Guidelines? Why or why not?
VITA

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Bachelor of Arts, Cinema & Photography, May 2019

Research Paper Title:
Preventative Steps Social Networks, Such As Facebook, Take Against Sex Trafficking

Major Professor: Bridget Lescelius