Research Proposal: Construction of Homelessness on Conventional and Digital Media

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July 28, 2019

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Today, homelessness is a major social concern that adversely impacts the functioning of societies. Research is one great instrument to recognise the actual magnitude of the issue of the homelessness. It is observed that young individuals are greatly influenced by the growing problem of homelessness. There is a need for examining the actual causes of this issue to offer better social reforms for all citizens. On the other hand, technology dramatically changes the standard of living in societies. Conventional mass media and social media are the primary sources of information for people today. The increased media consumption not only shapes the way we learn and absorb information, but also our social interactions. It is natural to assume that it would influence our interaction with the homelessness populations around us. The active role of technological advancement specifically in case of social media platform can never ignore when it comes to the examination of the problem of homelessness specifically in case of young people (Loader & Mercea, 2012). It is established that the medium of social media can effectively use to enhance social knowledge when it comes to the problem of homelessness (Woelfer & Hendry, 2010). The focus of this study is to utilise the approach of the research to examine how effectively conventional and digital media can play its role to present the problem of homelessness, and its implications in the Australian context.

# Research Questions

• What is the role of media in presenting the issue of homelessness?

• How does the active depiction of homeless youth on different social media sites influence the approach of presenting the problem of homelessness?

# Literature Review

The world today has been transformed by mass media. It has not just changed the way we communicate or access information but created a lasting influence on the way we learn about the external world. Consequently, an ordinary individual’s construction of reality is now extensively shaped by the media content that he/she consumes; thus, their ideas are often not their own (McCombs, 2013). An array of earlier studies have noted that the depiction of homelessness, across various media platforms, has been inaccurate and perpetuates stereotypes (Barajas, 2015). The media’s construction of homelessness carries a direct and often purposeful influence on public opinion, even as other sources of influence also exist (Mao, Calder, Richter, & Burns, 2011).

The media’s construction of homelessness is itself influenced by various factors such as organizational routines, journalistic norms, individual influence, and the tendency to portray social problems as political events (Mao, Calder, Richter, & Burns, 2011). Each of these factors go on to further influence how the media frames homelessness. For instance, the ‘sympathetic frame’ is likely to focus on the elderly, the ill, and the children to evoke emotional reactions from the audience (Kendall, 2011). The ‘exceptionalism frame’ tends to frame homelessness as an inspirational story of struggles against adversity. A typically rare form is ‘compassion frame’ which depicts homeless individuals as the ignored, forgotten, and invisible section of society (Mao, Calder, Richter, & Burns, 2011). Moreover, the media’s tendency to portray homelessness in terms of numbers can create compassion fatigue which further reduces the story’s impact and recycles stereotypes about it (Kennedy, 2018). Another form of depiction places the predicaments of homeless people on their own wrongdoing; characterizing them as deviant, drug users, HIV carriers and transmitters, as well as mentally ill. Hence, it perpetuates an ‘us vs them’ narrative (Mao, Calder, Richter, & Burns, 2011). Other accounts also tend to attribute the condition to systemic forces, natural disasters, and at times bad luck (Kennedy, 2018).

In terms of visual representation, homelessness is once again inaccurately depicted. Portraying homeless individuals as dirty and bearded male drug addicts surviving on the streets is a common pattern in news and entertainment media (Radley, Hodgetts, & Cullen, 2006). Moreover, portrayals usually tend to be one of the two extremes; either of a mentally ill drug addict with raggedy clothes or that of a success story (Barajas, 2015). Some positive depictions such as in the television drama ‘Cathy Comes Home’ have received praise for raising critical issues (Platt, 1999). An overwhelming number of news reports tend to associate homelessness with criminal activities that reinforces the idea of homelessness as a social disorder (CHP, 2019). Journalistic accounts tend to associate the issue with personal incompetence rather than a result of structural problems such as unfair wages, unaffordable housing, and limited access for mental illness treatment (Schneider B. , 2011; Mao, Richter, Burns, & Chaw-Kant, 2012).

Studies on social media depictions of homeless people are limited in scope and number. However digital media platforms generally tend to devalue homeless people, treating them as backdrops instead of individuals with cultural, social, and moral worth (Barajas, 2015). Digital media content is often under pressure to deliver ‘clickbait’ content to drive web traffic, which prompts platforms to use emotional hooks and angles for their stories (CHP, 2014). On digital platforms, representation of homelessness remains limited to that of passive, diseased individuals who are overly reliant on aid and charity (Hodgetts, Hodgetts, & Radley, 2006). The images selected to portray homeless people commonly connote a lack of privacy, warmth, shelter, and retreat alongside images of anti-social behaviour and criminality (McCarthy, 2013).

Photographic representations of homeless people on conventional and digital media have been noted by researches to produce stereotyping and devaluation in terms of photographic technique, composition and production (Schmidt, 2015). In academic literature as well as media reports, photographic images tend to depict homeless people as lonely and miserable when, on the contrary, they could be experiencing the opposite (Hodgetts, Hodgetts, & Radley, 2006). Thus the ability of the photograph to produce different connotations from the way it captures a particular moment is significant. A homeless individual photographed drinking could, in fact, give a picture of positive communal activity that represents reciprocal relationships and group cohesion instead of negative connotations (Hodgetts, Hodgetts, & Radley, 2006). Hence, the actual experiences of homeless people are overwhelmingly absent in literature, conventional and digital media.

Consequently, a clear lack of public awareness can be observed with respect to homelessness. A national survey in Australia found that 92% of the participants believed that a homelessness is one that lives on the streets. However, recent census figures in Australia found that only 6% of homeless Australians were rough sleepers while a majority live in overcrowded houses, live in a friend’s caravan or garage, or are couch surfing (Michael, 2018). In another survey, a majority of participants constructed the profile of a homeless person as a 40-year-old male who sleeps rough, and regularly uses drugs or suffers from mental illness for which he/she was not likely to accept or seek help (CHP, 2014). A large number of participants believed that the homeless person’s situation was a result of his/her own actions and demonstrated a lack of empathy and motivation to engage with them. However in reality, 44% of homeless individuals are women in Australia whereas 42% of homeless individuals are under 25 (CHP, 2014). Likewise, homelessness individuals are three times more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of crime, and most crimes these people engage them are trivial in nature (Walsh, 2006). Invisible homelessness in urban spaces, which includes women, people living in shelters, and those relying on social networks, makes up about 91.6% of homelessness (Schmidt, 2015). A frequent pattern in literature on homelessness is disparity between public perception and reality; yet most homeless individuals are aware of these inaccurate depictions (Hodgetts, Hodgetts, & Radley, 2006). They are also aware of the need to exist outside the boundaries of stereotypical expectations and public accusations, on order to preserve a personal sense of dignity.

The projected image of homelessness on media and digital media is significantly important due to the extent of social and cultural implications it has. Media coverage of homeless people is socially constructed, and therefore, reflects how issues concerning homelessness are addressed and looked into (McCarthy, 2013; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The dominant understandings and interpretations of homelessness also affects service responses to it, whether related to welfare, aid, or law enforcement. A negative portrayal of homelessness has been found to be correlated with tough campaigns calling for ‘cleaning the streets’, and ‘moving the people on’ to eradicate ‘visible homelessness’ (Zufferey, 2006). Stereotypical characterizations make individuals, society, and the government oblivious to the reality of the issue. As a result, society fails to recognise it as a structural problem that needs constant effort and attention, and instead, reduce it to individual issues (Barajas, 2015). All this points towards the need for research because strong studies on the subject can prompt media coverage, mobilize public support, and influence public policy. Digital and social media have become an indispensable part of people’s lives and the significant influence of social media on people’s routines, behaviour, and interactions is documented in research (Poulsen, Kvåle, & Leeuwen, 2018). Therefore, investigating the construction of homelessness on social media can predict the way people are being influenced with regards to it. A range of literature exists on the role of conventional print and electronic media on the construction of homelessness; however, a significant gap in research exists with regards to social media to make any concrete claims about the subject.

# Policy Context

Development of the proper policy is ranked as the critical practical measure to successfully address the issue of homelessness. Attaining valuable knowledge through the platform of research can be helpful for the policymakers to initiate new ideas according to the actual requirements of the homeless people. Detailed consideration of the involvement of homeless individuals on social media and the representation of the issue on the platform of social media will be effective for the policymakers to recognise the actual magnitude of this problem. The results of this study play role as the guiding domain to define the actual social and emotional concerns of the homeless young individuals. Stabilising of homeless people is only possible through the improved forms of shelter and healthcare services for this particular group (Best, 2010). The objective of the active evaluation of the issue of the homelessness can better apprehend by observing the trend of social media adopted by homeless people. The desired combination of the channels of social media and the policy development will be helpful to propose better solutions to the issue of homelessness.

# Innovation in Research

One of the major objectives for the researcher is to effectively contribute to the overall process of the research work on the specific issue. It is important to add some new form of knowledge to ensure better handling of the concern of homelessness. This specific research work focuses on the issue of homelessness, mainly in case of young individuals. Undoubtedly, a large portion of the young population is suffering from the calamity of the homelessness in different forms. It is crucial to focus on this certain age group and offer some effective practical measures. Identification of the actual problems of homeless youth is only possible through the assessment of the actual involvement of these entities in the entire process of issue handling. Comprehensive assessment of the former research work on the issue helped to figure out what areas are previously covered to research the concern of homelessness critically. It is observed that there is limited research approach to examine that how the active intervention of the young homeless individuals in the form of different social media channels can be helpful to effectively present the actual issues of the homeless people. The finding of this research study will be characterised as an innovative form of research when it comes to assessing the involvement of the young homeless people through their representation on social media.

# Benefits for Society and Social Work

The problem of homelessness recognised as a complex social problem that is associated with different important aspects. There is a need for examining different dimensions relevant to this problem to find the most suitable solutions. Social stigma is established as the major aspect of concern that appeared for homeless people. The outcomes of this research work can be helpful for society to define the issue of the homeless as the actual social concern. It is important to enhance the communication channels between homeless people and the rest of the world to find out better solutions. The results of this particular study will benefit society to accept the presence of homeless young individuals and consider their problems seriously. This research work will also assistive for the people who involve the discipline of social work. The new information in case of presentation of the issue of homelessness on social media will help social worker to figure out the actual concern and provide them with better social services.

# Proposed Research Methodology

The adoption of an appropriate methodology is essential to ensure reliable outcomes in research. It will also provide a suitable framework for the research methods which are needed to investigate the hypothesis and the research questions. In this respect, the appropriate methodology of investigating the constructions of homelessness on social media will be a qualitative interpretive analysis based on visual and context analysis.

## Selection of Research Methodology

The reviewed literature provides a valuable base for our research. Interpretive research is a useful research paradigm because it assumes that the social construction of reality is not objective but instead shaped by human social contexts and experiences. Therefore, the subjective interpretations of various research participants can help researchers ‘interpret’ reality by means of a ‘sense-making process’, instead of determining it from hypothesis testing (Lumen, 2018). Hence, interpretive research focusses on the signs, language, and meanings from the participants’ perspective. Within this area, visual research methods have seen widespread use especially in sociology, social anthropology, media and cultural studies, and cultural geography (Knoblauch, Baer, Laurier, Petschke, & Schnettler, 2008).

A useful research methodology for analyzing secondary visual images was posited by Rose (2007) who suggested that investigating visual images involves understanding it from three modalities; the technological, the social, and the compositional modality. The compositional modality features formal structures related to image design such as line of direction, positive-negative space, and colour, while the social modality is linked to the economic, social, institutional, and political practices that produce the image or can help interpret it. This visual semiotic methodological approach will facilitate us in understanding how social media images produce cultural meaning (Rose, 2007). Moreover, mass-media and social media content can produce multiple meanings for multiple people in various circumstances, moods and places, therefore a qualitative-interpretive semiotic analysis of these meanings is useful for our particular research (Thummy, 2017).

Additionally, the extent of social media’ integration in contemporary lives and its ability to produce multimodal meanings carry great potential in visual semiotic research. Hence, posts, captions, tweets, filters, gifs, and images are valuable semiotic resources, and are important because of the deep impact this media has on our behaviour, interactions, and routines (Poulsen, Kvåle, & Leeuwen, 2018). A qualitative interpretive analysis through visual research is therefore needed to reflect the diverse beliefs, values, and perceptions individuals have with respect to homelessness (Kendall, 2011).

The concept of visual homelessness is itself a product of prevailing social conventions, and thus, an analysis of visual markers, symbols, images, and signs can contribute to our knowledge of various structural factors that influence our perception. Hence the visual markers of visible homelessness, ragged clothes, plastic bags, sleeping on the ground will be compared to the social context and values they permeate such as laziness, uselessness, crime, etc. It helps determine how visible homelessness is culturally constructed using these stereotypical portrayals (Schmidt, 2015). A photographed image itself carries intentions and ideas, which may be shaped by its intended use, its institutional or political context, the intended effect, as well as the target audience. The bias of the photographer and his/her relationship with the homeless subject, each affects how the image will be potentially constructed in the mind of the social media user (Schmidt, 2015). Hence, this methodology not only allows us to focus on the visual aspects of the image but also its context, reception, and interpretation by the audience.

## Research Methods & their Suitability

The use of visual data in this particular research can be categorized as qualitative in nature, as it addresses the cultural and social meaning of digital images and how it will be interpreted (Knoblauch, Baer, Laurier, Petschke, & Schnettler, 2008). The semiotic aspect of the research will interpret meanings of the sign in terms of the response it can elicit in a particular social setting. Thus the interpretive and representative nature of the data encourages the use of a qualitative-interpretive approach (Buscemi, 2016).

The data collection will span over a time period of 2 months. The context analysis part of the research will require collecting textual data from the images, beginning with sampling procedures. One part of the research process will coincide with a homeless campaign by any notable organization or institution that is sufficiently covered by the media. Sampling will span over a period of two weeks and involve the research group to observe the social media engagement and relevant themes resulting from the campaign. Another set of data will be collecting over a period of two weeks to observe general social media content related to the theme of homelessness.

The researchers themselves will play a significant role in the study as the data requires to be analyzed using an interpretive lens to understand the various connotations of the imagery and text. During the time period, all user-generated and official social media content with respect to homelessness will be observed. The selected images and text for further analysis will be based on user engagement with respect to likes, retweets, and reach. A minimum of 50 likes/retweets or an outreach of 1000 people and above will be used to narrow down and homogenize the data (Buscemi, 2016). Twitter and Instagram will be selected as the two platforms because of the relatively stable and easy access to data provided by these platforms (Weller, 2015). On both platforms data will be searched through general keyword and hashtag searches, and the resulting visual and textual data will be considered owing to their semiotic properties and semantic properties. Data will be collected through screenshots and organised into folders by the researchers to find common themes (Messaris, 2006).

The primary data used for visual semiotic analysis will comprise of digital images and photographs which are returned in search results. Additionally, their corresponding captions, tweets, or narrative texts which accompany each image will be collected to analyze the context. Furthermore, user posts and comments on the selected posts will also be documented by means of screenshots. Finally, to determine whether the visual depictions are constructive or destructive in nature, a checklist provided by Schimdt (2015) will be utilized (see Appendix A). Finally, the resulting themes and depictions of homeless people on Instagram and twitter will be compared to earlier findings documented in literature with respect to print and electronic media portrayals.

# Data Analysis

The data to be analyzed comprises of digital images and text which required blending the two methods of visual semiotic analysis with a thematic analysis of the text. After the data is collected, it will be sorted and organised to obtain a general sense of the data. Only posts which satisfy the inclusion criteria in terms of social media engagement will be used for the analysis. The text of the selected posts and user comments will be extracted by means of OCR software for a qualitative thematic analysis, which will provide context to the accompanying digital images. Analyzing the user comments will evaluate public perception and response to the post. The analysis is based upon grounded theory which involves generating information categories which are positioned within a theoretical model to illustrate the underlying themes and elements emerging from their connection (Creswell, 2014). For this purpose, open-coding, axial coding, and selecting coding will be used respectively.

The inductive open coding process will help code the images and the texts into recurring patterns and ideological themes. This will be further aided by taxonomies and concept maps, which are useful to establish link between patterns and emerging themes (Ownby, 2013). The visual semiotic analysis will be done by analyzing the signs, the signified, and the signifiers. These will include identifying the objects of the visual, the general composition of the image, alongside the semiotic signs and codes. The analysis will help interpret the various meanings given by the image in context of themes. The themes will identify the account holders’ beliefs, values, issues, and attitudes towards homelessness.

# Research Timeline

The research will be carried out over a period of 2 months. The following chart provides a detailed look into the project’s timeline:

## Gantt Chart

## Project Outlining

The data collection period will span over a month in which two weeks will coincide with the upcoming homelessness awareness campaign by the Australian Council to Homeless Persons. The campaigns are usually widely covered by local media and marketed on different social media platforms. The first team will be assigned to cover user engagement with the campaign on twitter and Instagram in the subsequent two weeks of the launch. The second team will cover general social media content for a two-week period before the campaign. Two members will be assigned to each team, who will collect, organise, sort and present their findings to the group for analysis. The analysis will span a period of 2 weeks, while the remaining 2 weeks will be reserved for documenting the findings and preparing the initial draft of the research.

# Obstacles and Risk Mitigation

A key component of this study is interpretive research which will require the researchers to be capable enough to observe and interpret complex social phenomena from the participant’s perspective. They will have to reconcile the diverse perspectives of the sample while minimizing any preconceptions and personal biases when making inferences. Furthermore, the data itself is subject to bias, and the collected sample may contain content from less knowledgeable or less credible individuals who are posting about the issue. It is also possible for political agendas to create false or misleading impressions. Therefore, the process of verification is important to enhance the validity and reliability of the research. The mechanisms used for the research have to be consistent and accurate and the researchers have to ensure that their approach remains consistent (Creswell, 2014). The triangulation method will help improve the research’s validity by comparing collected evidence from other sources of information to build a coherent justification for the themes (Creswell, 2014). This will be done through member checking, clarifying the bias, spending certain time in the field, and peer-reviews, and information look-ups. These strategies would help mitigate some of these issues and strengthen the research.

## Ethical Considerations

A key ethical consideration in social media research is privacy. The collected data will include the account names of the collected sample and it is not feasible to contact every account holder to obtain informed consent for the research. The researchers will therefore codify the account holder’s names in the documentation to protect their identity. The data will remain confidential and password protected. Moreover, because the methods may involve sampling biases, quality issues, and to an extent, a non-reproducible research design, it is considered contrary to the ethics of research in general (Weller, 2015). It is also important to take additional care when representing the view of the samples; misrepresenting someone’s view would be unethical. Approval of the University’s Internal Review Board (IRB) will be obtained before commencing the study.

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# Appendix A

Following is the checklist provided by Schmidt (2015) to determine the nature of the digital image capturing homelessness:

1. Production and Context
   1. What is the intent behind capturing homelessness?
   2. What is the image focusing on?
   3. Are the subjects aware that they are photographed and why they will be exposed?
2. Power
   1. Who is taking the photograph
      1. Are the subjects allowed to choose or decide on how they should be photographed or what should be captured?
3. Image content
   1. Is homelessness as a motif being used as a symbol for another purpose?
   2. Are the subjects represented as capable and active subjects?
   3. Are typical visual markers that characterise homelessness and poverty avoided?