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## ENGAGING JUVENILE DELINQUENTS AND YOUTHS-AT-RISK: YOUTH WORKERS' USE OF FACEBOOK FOR MEDIATED PASTORALISM

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### Abstract

Youth work seeks to rehabilitate juvenile delinquents for re-entry into mainstream society and to prevent youths-at-risk from falling into delinquency, thus necessitating that youth workers assiduously monitor their clients. With the avid use of social media by youths, youth workers must also adopt these communication platforms to reach out to their young clients. Drawing from interviews with youth workers, this study analyses how they use Facebook to communicate with their clients and monitor their activities. Surveillance forms a key thrust of youth workers' professional use of Facebook, enhancing their ability to oversee these youths' personal development for the purposes of mentoring and rehabilitation. Contrary to dystopian, power-centric conceptions of surveillance, the study finds that the youth workers' surveillance of their clients is undergirded by care and beneficence, better understood using Foucault's concept of pastoralism. Through mediated pastoralism via Facebook, these youth workers can derive a more extensive picture of their clients, including their emotional state and peer interactions. With this knowledge, the youth workers can then calibrate their interventions more strategically and only step in when their clients engage in behaviour that poses significant risks or danger. In so doing, the youth workers foster durable relational bonds with their clients that they can still leverage over time. Facebook communications also help the youth workers to bridge communication gaps with these youths. The study also examines how the youths resist the youth workers' oversight in various ways, including engaging in sousveillance.

**Keywords** pastoralism, sustainable social capital, sousveillance, social media, social work, juvenile delinquency

### Introduction

Youth workers are social workers who counsel juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk, and are at the forefront of society's engagement with this marginalised youth population. Their mission is to rehabilitate these youths to prevent them from becoming further

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disenfranchised, and to promote in them positive development (Walker, 2003). The marginalisation of youths, both perceived and actual, is a significant issue because global trends indicate that if not effectively managed, the swelling numbers of disenfranchised and disaffected youths can contribute to social unrest (Renn, Jovanovic, & Schröter, 2011; Urdal & Hoelscher, 2009). To successfully reach out to youths on the fringe, youth workers need to foster with their clients a strong relationship that is built on mutual understanding, trust and open communication (Harrison & Wise, 2005). In our increasingly mediatised society where youths are ardent technology adopters, youth workers must also utilise new communication technologies to engage with their young charges. In particular, with young people's growing use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, youth workers are adapting to this evolving communication landscape by interacting with their clients on these new platforms.

To understand how the emergence of social media impacts on youth workers' communication with juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk, this study focuses on youth workers who use Facebook to engage with their clients. Specifically, it examines how youth workers appropriate Facebook to perform their professional duties and reach out to their clients. It also considers the opportunities and challenges these youth workers encounter in the process and the strategies they develop to manage this novel communication platform. The study also interrogates the ethical implications of youth workers' use of Facebook to conduct surveillance over their clients, and probes into the resistance the youths assert towards such supervisory oversight. It is part of a larger 20-month long study on the media use of juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk in Singapore, a city-state where Internet and mobile phone adoption is widespread and young people are avid users of social media (Social Media Today, 2011).

## **Research questions**

The study sought to address three research questions:

RQ1: How do youth workers use Facebook to foster communication with their clients and in what ways?

RQ2: How do youth workers use Facebook to conduct pastoralism over their clients? RQ3: Do the clients manifest resistance towards the youth workers use of Facebook for communication and surveillance and if so, how do the youth workers manage such resistance?

## **Method**

The data presented here is drawn from a larger 20 month study on the media use of juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk in Singapore. The first phase of research comprised interviews with youths at various stages of the "delinquency lifestage": (i) at-risk: youths identified as at-risk and receiving preventative counselling, (ii) in rehab: juvenile offenders incarcerated in low- or high- security residential rehabilitation homes; and (iii) post-rehab: youths who have undergone rehabilitation and are seeking to reintegrate into society. The second phase of research was then initiated to obtain the

perspective of youth workers who guide youths in the “at-risk” or “post- rehab” stages<sup>1</sup>, and undergoing state-mandated counselling.

We interviewed a total of 24 youth workers, 13 of whom were female and 11 male. Their experience in youth work ranged from one to 20 years and their clients were aged 12 to 25. Half the interviewees counselled exclusively male clients, a quarter exclusively females and another quarter counselled both males and females. The youth workers were based in various institutions including schools, youth drop-in centres, guidance agencies and youth outreach organisations, with their clients having been referred to them by the police, rehabilitation homes or schools. Their clients comprised those who had committed relatively minor infractions such as underage sex, smoking and drinking, to those with more serious offences such as drug abuse, theft, gang fights, rioting and assault. The frequency with which the youth workers met their clients varied according to the severity of the youths’ record of delinquency and offence.

We interviewed the youth workers using a series of semi-structured questions about their work experience and the challenges and gratifications they derived from youth work. We also probed them on their experiences and perceptions of using social media such as Facebook and mobile phone text messaging to communicate with their clients. We also sought their perceptions of their clients’ use of online and mobile communications. Additionally, we asked them to log into their Facebook accounts and guide us through various aspects including their friend networks, typical usage patterns as well as to show us the Facebook posts of their clients, and any Facebook communications they had engaged in with clients. Written notes on the general nature of these posts and communications were made but no personal details of their clients was captured. Analysis of the interview transcripts involved identifying dominant themes and issues arising from the interviews, using the “meaning condensation” approach (Kvale, 1996).

## **Key findings**

Contrary to dystopian, power-centric conceptions of surveillance, the study finds that the youth workers’ surveillance of their clients is undergirded by care and beneficence, better understood using Foucault’s concept of pastoralism. Through mediated pastoralism via Facebook, these youth workers can derive a more extensive picture of their clients, including their emotional state and peer interactions. With this knowledge, the youth workers can then calibrate their interventions more strategically and only step in when their clients engage in behaviour that poses significant risks or danger. In so doing, the youth workers foster durable relational bonds with their clients that they can still leverage over time. Facebook communications also help the youth workers to bridge communication gaps with these youths. The study also examines how the youths resist the youth workers’ oversight in various ways, including engaging in sousveillance.

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<sup>1</sup> Youths who are in rehabilitation homes have limited access to mobile phone and Internet communications and the youth workers who guide them would interact with them face-to-face rather than through mediated communications.

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