

WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES SMALL: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA  
NARRATIVES FOLLOWING THE 2016 EXCEL INDUSTRIES SHOOTING IN  
HESSTON, KANSAS AND SUBSEQUENT COMMUNITY RESPONSE AND  
RECOVERY

A Thesis by

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Submitted to the Elliott School of Communication  
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Master of Arts

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Communication.

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## DEDICATION

Dr. Deborah Ballard-Reisch, a fierce woman who always persists no matter what. I am inspired by your continual support and kindness. I am a better student, instructor, activist, and woman because of you. You will forever have a lasting impact on my heart.

Cory Rychener, you are the love of my life and my foundation. I thank you for allowing me the space to focus on my research without guilt, for relieving stressful times with much needed laughter, and for reminding me that my dreams and goals are always a worthwhile investment. I love you.

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*It was the experience of a lifetime.  
I hope it was -- you know -- the only experience like this that I'll have.*

Interviewee #1

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## ABSTRACT

The sleepy Mennonite town of Hesston, Kansas was suddenly disrupted on February 25th, 2016 when an employee of Excel Industries, a lawn care company, entered the company plant with an AK-47 and a Glock 22 semi-automatic pistol and opened fire. Three employees were killed and fourteen injured before the shooter was killed by a responding police officer. The tragedy made local and national news by the early evening and coverage continued for weeks. This two-part exploratory qualitative communication study focuses on the impact of media narratives and community response in the wake of local tragedy. In the first part of this study, a media analysis of twenty local, regional, national and international news articles that covered the 2016 Excel Industries shooting was conducted using elements of fantasy theme analysis and narratology. A comparative analysis was then performed to determine the similarities and differences among the four media categories. In the second part of this study, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with community professionals of Hesston and Harvey County who were involved in a professional capacity following the Excel Industries shooting. A thematic analysis of interview data revealed four major themes with nine subthemes. This study provides insights from community professionals who directly dealt with the response and recovery phases of this local tragedy, how the Hesston community responded to this tragedy, offers advice from community professionals of Hesston and Harvey County specifically directed toward other communities who might face similar local crises in the future.

*Keywords:* community, crisis response model, media, narrative, tragedy

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to understand the impact of emerging discourses within communities and media narratives following local tragedies, using one specific tragedy in a small town in Kansas as the primary case study. As a community member of Hesston, Kansas, United States, who watched firsthand the coverage following the 2016 Excel Industries workplace shooting, I wondered whether there was a difference in narratives portrayed and reported depending on the media outlet. I also wondered how the community of Hesston was seemingly able to quickly create and push their own narrative, “We Are Hesston Strong,” almost immediately following the shooting. This personal interest was the foundation for the present exploratory study. In addition to a multi-sample media analysis, I interviewed ten community professionals from the city of Hesston and/or Harvey County who were involved in the post-tragedy response and recovery efforts that took place in the weeks following the shooting.

This research study uses Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory (Bormann, 1985; Bormann, Cragan & Shields, 2001), specifically elements of his fantasy theme rhetorical analysis, and narratology (Bochner, 1994; Fisher, 1987, McLeod, 2006) to examine local and national media messages, extracting the dramatic elements that operate within the narratives, to determine and compare the overarching storylines among the different media outlets covering the event.

This research also uses qualitative methods of research through in-person interviews with local community professionals of Hesston, Kansas/Harvey County who were involved in the post-tragedy response and recovery initiatives after the shooting,

particularly those involved in framing the event for the media and media responders themselves, in order to determine their exposure to the media narratives surrounding the event, their response to those narrative, if applicable, and their advice to other small communities that like Hesston may face their own local tragedies.

Analysis of articles covering the tragedy at Excel Industries indicated differences between the local and regional media outlets when compared to the national and international media outlets. Local and regional media outlets, overall, focused less on the “immediate” event details and instead covered the long-term reaction and response of Hesston community citizens and community leaders. In contract, national and international media outlets focused less on the “long-term” response of the community and community leaders and more on the actual event itself. National and international media outlets also used more graphic and descriptive language choice when compared to the language choices in local and regional media coverage.

Analysis uncovered four major themes with nine subthemes, 1) ‘response’ phase emphasis, subthemes: sustaining the community narrative, “We Are Hesston Strong” campaign; 2) prior preparation and training, subthemes: prior positive community relationships, flexibility in roles, starting and ending local; 3) positive media interactions, subthemes: media content and access, strategic media use; and 4) negative media interactions, subthemes: false information, ignoring media coverage. This study provides insights from community professionals who directly dealt with the response and recovery phases following this local tragedy, analyzes how the Hesston community responded to the tragedy, and offers community professionals’ advice for other communities that might face similar local tragedies. The implications of framing rural

community tragedies through national, politically-based narratives in contrast to locally focused contextual analyses are discussed with an eye toward supporting rural communities in maintaining identity and culture in the face of national scrutiny.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The sleepy Mennonite town of Hesston, Kansas was suddenly disrupted on February 25th, 2016 when an employee of Excel Industries, a lawn care company, entered the company plant with an AK-47 and a Glock 22 semi-automatic pistol and opened fire. Three employees were killed and fourteen injured before the shooter, identified as Excel employee Cedric Larry Ford, was killed by a responding police officer. The tragedy made local and national news by the early evening and coverage continued for weeks.

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), workplace violence is “the act or threat of violence, ranging from verbal abuse to physical assaults directed toward persons at work on duty” (2017, p. 1). Since the 1980s, violence has been recognized as a leading cause of occupational mortality and morbidity. On average, 1.7 million workers are injured each year, and more than 800 die due to workplace violence (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001; Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). Crisis-inducing events and acute crisis episodes are highly prevalent today (Roberts & Ottens, 2005). Each year, millions of people are confronted with crisis-inducing events that they cannot resolve on their own, and they often turn for help to crisis units of community mental health centers, outpatient clinics, college counseling centers, and domestic violence programs (Roberts, 2005).

#### **2.1 Crisis Intervention Model**

Crisis communication is designed to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes that result from a crisis (Coombs, 1999). To be effective, crisis and risk communication,

like any other aspect of communication should focus on an audience-centered approach and perspective (Ballard-Reisch, Clements-Nolle, Jenkins, Sacks, Pruitt & Leathers, 2008). For this research study, Roberts' (2005) definition of "crisis" was used to reference an individuals' crises within the larger community crisis. A crisis in the individual sense is defined as:

An acute disruption of psychological homeostasis in which one's usual coping mechanisms fail and there exists evidence of distress and functional impairment. The subjective reaction to a stressful life experience that compromises the individual's stability and ability to cope or function. The main cause of a crisis is an intensely stressful, traumatic, or hazardous event, but two other conditions are also necessary: (1) the individual's perception of the event as the cause of considerable upset and/or disruption; and (2) the individual's inability to resolve the disruption by previously used coping mechanisms. Crisis also refers to "an upset in the steady state." It often has five components: a hazardous or traumatic event, a vulnerable or unbalanced state, a precipitating factor, an active crisis state based on the person's perception, and the resolution of the crisis. (Roberts, 2005, p. 778).

Given such parameters for crisis, it is imperative that crisis workers and community professionals involved in post-crisis efforts have a framework in mind to guide them in responding to a crisis. Generally, it is suggested by researchers and experts that for a host of reasons a crisis intervention model is needed (Ballard-Reisch, et. al., 2008; Courtney, Cole & Reynolds, 2003; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Communication is an essential component of any community's public health preparedness initiative (Courtney, et. al., 2003). Additionally, the integration of health, risk, crisis and disaster communication research requires a model to articulate the communication priorities within a developmental approach to emergency crisis management (Ballard-Reisch, et. al., 2008). For this research study, the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Model or CERC (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005) was used as a template to explain the "response" and "recovery" phases of crisis management

within the larger community. The five stages of CERC are 1) *pre-crisis*, which emphasizes risk messages, warnings and preparations; 2) *initial event*, which involves rapid communication of an emergency and/or crisis; 3) *maintenance*, which is concerned with the ongoing facilitation of the situation, including continued uncertainty reduction efforts to enhance decision making; 4) *resolution*, which deals with communicating with the public regarding ongoing clean up, remediation, recovery and re-building efforts; and 5) *evaluation*, which emphasizes lessons learned and new understandings of risk (Ballard-Reisch, et. al., 2008).

Effective communication is the foundation for appropriate response for all phases of public health emergencies, be it before, during or after the crisis (Ballard-Reisch, et. al., 2008). The CERC model provides the framework for mobilizing effective risk and crisis communication in situations that threaten the health or wellbeing of a community (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). Some experts suggest that special care must be taken during the “recovery” phase of crisis intervention, which comes after the initial “response” phase (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005; Roberts, 2005). Professionals must be able to understand and distinguish an acute stress reaction from the intense impact of the disaster. This usually requires certain professional expertise because, on the surface, both reactions include shock, numbness, exhaustion, disbelief, sadness, indecisiveness, frustration, anxiety, anger, impulsiveness, and fear (Roberts, 2005).

After a local crisis, it is crucial that a community extends resources to embrace and support those who are suffering (Schubert, 2003). Prior academic research surrounding community tragedies has emphasized the benefits of having a structured crisis communication strategy in place. Meilman and Hall (2006) reflected on a crisis

response model that had been developed by their faculty team over the course of eight years, which included Community Support Meetings (CSMs) offered to anyone following a tragedy directly involving a student, staff or faculty member on their college campus. Meilman and Hall stated, “We have found this process enormously helpful. In times of crisis and major distress, we feel prepared, even on very short notice, to handle the psychological impact of tragedies. Rather than engaging in last-minute scrambling to organize a program, we have an established structure and format that works” (p. 384).

Per Meilman and Hall, CSMs include a variety of services for the affected public, including a facilitation time for open questions and concerns, sharing stories, giving out flyers such as Iris Bolton’s<sup>1</sup> “Suggestions for Survivors,” and directing those affected to additional resources within their own community to utilize if they want to (2006). A crisis event can provide an opportunity, a challenge to life goals, a rapid deteriorating of functioning, or a positive turning point in the quality of one’s life (Roberts & Dziegielewski, 1995).

## **2.2 Media and Coverage**

Hart (1997) asserts that rhetorical criticism puts us in direct contact with humanness because it examines how humans communicate and how they create truth. Hart also claims that there are always additional elements to rhetoric than those that initially meet the eye. Campbell (1996) believes that, for this reason, we need critics to describe, interpret and evaluate rhetorical acts to help us understand what they are, and how and for whom they work. The importance of rhetorical criticism as a research method resides in critics’ abilities to reveal those non-obvious features of rhetoric that

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<sup>1</sup> Bolton, IM. Beyond surviving: suggestions for survivors. In: Dunne EJ, McIntosh JL, Dunne-Maxim K, eds. *Suicide and Its Aftermath: Understanding and Counseling Survivors*. New York, NY: Norton; 1987: 289-290.

the average individual may have heard or seen, but not noticed. Two theories grounded the rhetorical analysis of media reports in this study.

In today's age, mass media has a universal character that surpasses social and geographic borders (Claudia, 2016). In fact, 99% of major U.S. newspapers and many small to medium-sized papers have a presence on the Web (Smock, Doherty & Tyson, 2013). This means that local papers, which were only accessible to the residents residing in a certain geographic area, can now be accessed by anyone with an internet connection. News stories covered by both local and national news outlets can be seen by viewers around the world.

The media not only informs those who read it, but additionally, the media can shape our attitudes and behaviors (Claudia, 2016). Media has a constant and persistent presence in our lives, so its influence runs deep. The media is said by some researchers to be agenda-setting, that is, able to control the topics debated and addressed by the public (Fredrickson, Tainen & Hanning, 2014).

### **2.3 Hesston (city) Background and Excel Industries (company)**

Hesston is a city in Harvey County, Kansas, United States. As of the 2010 census, the city population was 3,709. Hesston was founded and named in 1886 after the Hess brothers who owned the land where a depot on the Missouri Pacific Railroad was built. Due to the railroad, Hesston became an important regional shipping point.

In 1960, John Regier founded the lawn mower manufacturing plant Excel Industries. In 1964, Excel Industries introduced the "Hustler" as the first zero-turn mower. Today, the company manufactures Hustler and Big Dog mowing equipment and exports its products to 30 countries worldwide. Excel Industries was awarded the

Governor's Exporter of the Year award in 2013 from the Kansas Department of Commerce. It is one of the town's largest employers, employing over 1,100 people.

### **2.3.1 1990 Hesston Tornado**

The city of Hesston is no stranger to community tragedy. On March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1990, a large portion of Hesston was damaged by an F5 tornado. A total of 226 homes and 21 businesses were destroyed, and several were swept completely from their foundations. 20 farms were torn apart in rural areas outside of Hesston. Light debris from Hesston was found 115 miles away in Nebraska. One person died and 59 people were injured. After passing through Hesston, the tornado increased to an "extreme F5" near the city of Goessel. The severity of the damage left behind by this tornado led some meteorologists to believe that the Goessel tornado was among the strongest ever documented at that time.

Following the Hesston tornado, a county-wide emergency management team was established, based on awareness that crises could occur again in the city of Hesston, as well as other cities within Harvey County, in the future. The 1990 Hesston tornado would later become a foundation for community development of crisis response models and "tabletop" discussions among community professionals in Hesston and Harvey County, including school officials, emergency management services, city administrators, and pastors involved in the town's "ministerial alliance."

### **2.3.2 2016 Excel Industries Tragedy**

The shooting on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016 began at around 4:57 pm at a street intersection in the city of Newton, Kansas, where Cedric Ford shot at two vehicles in a drive-by shooting. The first motorist suffered a non-fatal gunshot wound to the shoulder,

while the second motorist escaped unscathed after a bullet pierced the car's windshield. Ford then drove down Old U.S. Route 81 and fired at oncoming traffic. His vehicle and another one crashed in a ditch, after which he got out, shot and injured the other driver in the leg, and stole the victim's vehicle.

Ford then arrived at Excel Industries, entered one of the building plants, and fired randomly at the assembly lines, shooting several employees. Ford then encountered Police Chief Doug Schroder, the first officer to respond to the scene, and Schroeder fired at Ford. Ford was struck by Schroeder's bullets and died at 5:23 pm. Ford was armed with a Zastava Arms AK-47-style semi-automatic rifle and a Glock 22 semi-automatic pistol. It is estimated that around 150 employees were inside the plant at the time of the shooting.

Three people were killed by Ford and fourteen others were injured. The deceased victims were identified as Renee Benjamin, 30; Joshua Higbee, 31; and Brian Sadowsky, 44. All of them died inside the Excel Industries plant.

## **2.4 Local, Regional, National, and International Media**

Prior research suggests that news coverage can indirectly influence public opinion (Christen & Huberty, 2007). Research examining the relationship between existing media outlets and the Internet suggests a second definition of media reach: the degree to which people can share in society's communication resources (Christen & Huberty, 2007). In 1998, the Pew Research Center analyzed how local and regional media outlets framed news in contrast to national media outlets. Since this study was published long before social media, it focused on newspaper coverage only. The study sought to unpack the narrative techniques journalists from each outlet used to frame the

news and whether stories contained discernible underlying messages, and if so, what they communicated. Overall, they found that the front pages of local papers carried more straightforward reporting that focused on the facts of a news event while the reporting from national newspapers was more interpretative (Pew Research Center, 1998).

While there is certainly research surrounding workplace violence, as well as research surrounding local versus national media outlets covering the same stories, very few studies compare how local and national media outlets cover the same small town tragedies, such as the Excel Industries event in Hesston, Kansas. Similarly, there are few case studies on tragedies in small and/or rural communities using qualitative interviews and feedback directly from the community professionals and leaders involved. There are no extant case studies that have examined the Excel Industries shooting in Hesston, Kansas, making this study the first to delve into this event and merge qualitative interviews with media analysis to gain insight into how small and/or rural communities might handle local tragedies, especially in the midst of large-scale media attention.

For this study, three research questions were proposed. In researching these questions, it was crucial to perform both a media analysis and qualitative interviews discussing the findings of the media analysis to determine how communities make sense of local crises and potentially conflicting media narratives: RQ1) How did local, regional, national and international media outlets cover and report the 2016 Hesston, Kansas shooting at Excel Industries? After completion of the media analysis, three additional research questions were added: RQ2) How did the Hesston/Harvey County

community make collective sense of this local crisis? RQ3) How did the Hesston/Harvey County community withstand a national narrative that differed strongly from the local narrative? RQ4) What advice did Hesston/Harvey County community responders have for small / rural communities who might face a local crisis?

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Theoretical Orientation**

To answer the four proposed research questions, the researcher developed a two-part qualitative study. Part one of this two-part study incorporated elements of both symbolic convergence theory's fantasy theme analysis as well as narratology to analyze local, regional, national and international media articles that covered the 2016 Hesston, Kansas shooting at Excel Industries. The first research question for this study was: "How did local, regional, national and international media outlets cover and report the 2016 Hesston, Kansas shooting at Excel Industries?"

Based on the findings of part one, part two of this study used thematic analysis to analyze data from ten semi-structured individual interviews with community leaders of Hesston, Kansas and Harvey County who were involved in the "response" and/or "recovery" phase of the 2016 Hesston, Kansas shooting at Excel Industries. Participants were asked a series of open-ended interview questions designed to address three additional research questions: RQ2) How did the Hesston/Harvey County community make collective sense of this local crisis? RQ3) How did the Hesston/Harvey County community withstand a national narrative that differed strongly from the local narrative? RQ4) What advice did Hesston/Harvey County community responders have for small / rural communities who might face a local crisis?

After all participant interviews were completed, a thematic analysis approach was used to analyze data from interview data files and transcripts. Thematic analysis was specifically used as a process to discover commonalities among multiple interviewees.

Main themes and subthemes themes were extracted and analyzed through the thematic analysis process.

### **3.2 Symbolic Convergence Theory**

Symbolic convergence theory is a general theory of communication created by Ernest Bormann (1971) that analyzes the process by which content themes in rhetorical artifacts that are portrayed in a dramatic fashion connect the intended audience with a certain message. Symbolic convergence theory seeks to explain how worldviews are created symbolically that often involve large groups of people in the “audience” observing the rhetorical artifact. Symbolic convergence theory is based on two major assumptions. The first assumption suggests that communication creates reality. This implies that symbols are not merely imitations, but as Cassirer (1923) calls them, “organs of reality.” The second assumption is that symbols not only create reality for individuals, but also that there can be overlap among individuals’ meanings, thus creating a shared reality or shared subjective meanings.

Robert Bales (1970), identified the process of fantasizing or dramatizing in small groups, in which imaginative themes chain out verbally and nonverbally from person to person in a group. Bormann adapted Bales’ research and observations about fantasizing in small groups and created a method of rhetorical analysis called fantasy theme within symbolic convergence theory.

#### **3.2.1 Fantasy Theme Analysis**

The basic construct in symbolic convergence theory is the fantasy theme. Fantasy is an imaginative interpretation of events in the past, an envisioning of events in the future, or a depiction of present events removed in time and space from the actual

events (Bormann, 1972). Fantasy themes tell a story about a group's experience that creates reality for those who participate in those themes. Notable researchers Cragan and Shields (1981) have applied Bormann's symbolic convergence theory and the fantasy theme rhetorical analysis to a diverse array of communication contexts, from analyzing speeches, to analyzing and creating messages for political campaigns, to conducting marketing research and developing marketing campaigns. Their basic method in these various applications involved focus groups in which fantasy themes were offered to see which chained out in the groups and which did not.

Fantasy themes consist of three main types: character themes, setting themes, and action themes. Character themes depict who the characters are – heroes or villains, for example. Setting themes describe the scene in which the characters are situated – a specific time and place. Action themes describe plot lines or what the characters are doing. Together, a combination of fantasy themes constitutes a rhetorical vision, the worldview or the interpretation of reality that results from the combination of the various themes (Cragan & Shields, 1981).

Some of these rhetorical visions become standard scenarios that encompass character, setting, and action themes that are familiar to participants in the vision. In these circumstances, the visions are so often talked about and are so familiar that full descriptions of fantasy themes are not needed to evoke the rhetorical vision (Cragan & Shields, 1981; Foss, 2009). The rhetorical vision is the worldview or interpretations of reality that result from the combination of the various themes present in the characters, settings and actions (Bormann, 1972). The statement of one fantasy theme in the vision

may be enough of a symbolic cue for the audience to call up the entire rhetorical vision (Foss, 2009).

For example, Bormann (1972) described how “Electric Tom” became an unfortunate character theme during the presidential election of 1972. It referenced Thomas Eagleton, the first Democratic vice-presidential nominee, who was forced to withdraw from the ticket when it became known that he had electric shock therapy to battle severe depression. In another example, naming “Sandy Hook Elementary School” calls up a complex rhetorical vision of a tragedy characterized by a mass shooting, a lone gunman, deceased schoolchildren and administrators, and perhaps even gun control legislation. Nothing else besides the name of Sandy Hook Elementary School is needed to trigger this rhetorical vision because of the familiarity of the vision to those who participate in it, meaning they were exposed to the event itself through their connection to the town and/or school, or by the media exposure of the event. Because symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis contribute to an understanding of the ways in which certain worldviews are constructed symbolically, they contribute to an understanding of why those who participate in those worldviews act as they do.

When fantasy themes are created, the community who participates in the shared event chains out the specific theme together. After the event, the mentioning of the theme in the participating community brings back the same thoughts and feelings from the first time it was created. Fantasy themes can create an “in-group” where the theme is shared by those who experienced it and chose to participate. This theory and method thus reinforce the importance of symbols for creating and maintaining shared

identification and a shared vision of the world (Bormann, Cragan & Shields, 2001; Cragan & Shields, 1981).

For this research, elements of fantasy theme analysis were used to determine the characters, settings, and actions reported in media articles that covered the 2016 Hesston, Kansas shooting at Excel Industries. The researcher used fantasy theme analysis to highlight the characters, settings, and actions mentioned, and compare the strongest emerging characters, settings and actions portrayed against the other media articles being analyzed. After using this method to draw those three categories, the researcher then used narratology to determine the overarching tone of each article, describing how those three categories (characters, settings, actions) were portrayed using additional figurative language and descriptors.

### **3.3 Narratology**

Narratology is the study and theory of narratives, or complex stories, what they are made of, how they are structured, and what we gain from using them as a vehicle for communication (Bochner, 1994; McLeod, 2006). Narrative as a construct is broadly defined. Since “narrative” has become an umbrella term, it can be anything from a Shakespearean play to a bumper sticker on an automobile if it has the capacity to produce meaning through a series of events and characters in a story. Almost anything counts as a story if it has 1) a sequence with a beginning, middle and end; 2) some causal development between sequences and the conclusion; and 3) memorable phrasing to represent what happened (Bochner, 1994; Fisher, 1987).

Narratology involves the analysis of narratives, whereas storytelling involves the nuts and bolts of capturing events through a story, be it for sharing a personal

experience or for research purposes. From literary analysis, the term “text” has expanded to mean anything that is equivocal and thus legitimately open to interpretation. Narratology empowers us to analyze what texts mean in relation to each other.

Expanding narratology’s literary meaning and applying it to other settings supports the content that the artifact serves as a template for understanding human life (Bochner, 1994; Fisher, 1987) in such a way that one can take the art of literary description and examine routine or dramatic real lives for their narrative meaning (McLeod, 2006). Narratives differ from other ways of communicating since one prominent feature of narrative is its ability to dramatize cultural differences by setting up space and time relations, meaning that a narrative must occur somewhere at some time and offer the report of an idea or incident that has a spatiotemporal setting (Fisher, 1987).

Fisher (1987) suggests that narrative can include traditional rationality such as technical and rhetorical argument, but it may also incorporate other forms not always acknowledged as rational. Narrative arguments are persuasive to the extent that audiences see good reasons in them, regardless of the form. Listeners make sense of a story if it has coherence and fidelity. A story is coherent when it hangs together as a consistent frame of meaning, and it has fidelity if it feels truthful to the listener.

Finally, within the framework of narrative structure are the ingredients of power and identity. Just as narratives are interesting when they display people making independent choices, they are also compelling when the protagonists are powerful, when they have special abilities, when they have acute insights, and when they rise

above demanding circumstance, especially against an equally powerful adversary who stands in the way of them meeting and accomplishing a visionary goal (Bochner, 1994).

For this study, the researcher used narratology following the fantasy theme analysis which identified character, setting, and action themes in media articles covering the 2016 Hesston, Kansas shooting at Excel Industries. Narratology adds to the fantasy theme analysis by identifying the “tone” of each article and the portrayals of characters, settings and actions which generated each article’s overarching narrative. This allowed the researcher both to identify and compare media narratives within and across media types.

### **3.4 Study Overview**

In the first part of this two-part study, online and print news articles published within the first two weeks following the shooting incident at Excel Industries relating to the incident were collected. These articles were divided into four categories: *local news*, *regional news*, *national news*, and *international news*. The researcher then randomly selected five articles from each list to analyze and compare using fantasy theme analysis, which is a basic construct in Ernest Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory (Bormann, 1985), and Walter Fisher’s narratology, the study and theory of analyzing stories within “artifacts,” such as news articles, books, or song lyrics (Fisher, 1987).

In the second part of this research study, ten semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with community professionals of Hesston and Harvey County who were involved in the post-tragedy response and recovery efforts following the incident at Excel Industries. The interviews were individually conducted, transcribed, and thematically analyzed to determine major and minor themes present in the

participants' recall of events, perceived media influence, and primary community narratives perpetuated by the city of Hesston and Harvey County shortly after the tragedy.

### **3.5 Part One: Media Analysis Procedures**

#### **3.5.1 Media Artifact Selection**

News articles, both online and paper versions, were collected via an internet database search (LexisNexis, EBSCO, JSTOR) as well as cold calls to local and regional media stations for relevant archived articles to ensure comprehensive collection of relevant artifacts as well as diversity in media source geography, demographics and ownership. Clear designations between national media and local/regional media were made. National and international media is defined for this study as those outlets where national and foreign desks are fully staffed and have no institutional reliance on the Associated Press or other wire services to produce their stories. Local and regional media is defined for this study as those with resources concentrated on their local and regional desks, and significant use of Associated Press or other wire service stories to produce content (Pew Research Center, 1998).

Examples of local media news outlets include *The Hesston Record* and *The Kansan*. Examples of regional media news outlets include, but are not limited to, *The Wichita Eagle*, *KSN* (online), *KAKE* (online), and *Hutch News*. Examples of national media news outlets include, but are not limited to, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *CNN*, and *National Public Radio (NPR)*. Finally, examples of international media news outlets include, but are not limited to, *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, *Global News*, and *The Guardian*.

### **3.5.2 Artifact Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Media articles were screened by the researcher to determine appropriateness for this research study. Included articles were published within two weeks (starting February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016 to ending on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016) of the shooting and were about the Excel Industries incident. Excluded stories were published after the two-week timeframe (after March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016), or for local and regional outlets, were outside the parameters of the coverage area which was set as within the Kansas geographic area and no more than 50 miles from Hesston. For example, *The Minneapolis Star-Tribune* did not meet inclusion criteria and articles published there were thus excluded from consideration. While national and international media outlets did not have to be based in Kansas, local and regional examples did.

### **3.5.3 Data Analysis**

After collecting fifty-six articles that fit the inclusion criteria for this research study, the fifty-six articles were divided by media outlet into four categories: local (15 articles), regional (20 articles), national (14 articles), and international (7 articles). Articles from each category were randomly selected by shuffling the concealed articles and choosing five of them, resulting in twenty total articles selected for fantasy theme and narratology analysis (Table 1).

TABLE 1

LOCAL, REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ARTICLE ARTIFACTS USED

#	Media Source	Title	Date	URL Link
<b>Local Articles</b>				
1	The Hesston Record	Mowers showing up on Hesston lawns	02/26/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
2	The Hesston Record	Counseling available at Hesston MB Church	02/26/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
3	The Kansan	Gunman's co-worker describes start of Hesston factory attack	02/25/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
4	The Kansan	Day of tragedy	02/25/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
5	The Hesston Record	Candlelight vigil was first community-wide meeting after violence	03/02/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
#	Media Source	Title	Date	URL Link
<b>Regional Articles</b>				
1	The Wichita Eagle	Hesston co-workers describe scene of shooting at Excel Industries	02/25/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
2	KSN.com	Officials: Four dead, 14 mounded in shooting at Excel Industries in Hesston	02/25/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
3	Hutch News	We remember the Hesston Excel employees who left us far too soon	03/02/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
4	The Wichita Eagle	Excel Industries' Hesston factory temporarily closed after shooting	02/29/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
5	KAKE.com	Excel Industries resuming production Thursday	03/08/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
#	Media Source	Title	Date	URL Link
<b>National Articles</b>				
1	Washington Post	Two couples, torn apart by Kan. factory shooting, bloody but reunited	02/26/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
2	CNN	Kansas workplace shooting	02/25/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
3	USA Today	Three dead plus gunman in Kansas shooting; 14 injured	02/25/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
4	NPR	At least 4 dead, including gunman, at Kansas manufacturing plant	02/25/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
5	New York Times	Gunman kills 3 at Kansas factory before dying in shootout	02/25/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
#	Media Source	Title	Date	URL Link
<b>International Articles</b>				
1	The Guardian	Kansas shooting suspect was served protective order before killing	02/26/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
2	The Guardian	Gunman who killed three in Kansas shooting named by police	02/26/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
3	The Guardian	Kansas shooting: Police identify the three victims as cities mourn	02/27/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
4	BBC	Kansas shooting: Gunman kills three people in Hesston	02/26/16	<a href="#">Link</a>
5	Global News	Witnesses describe scene at Excel Industries in Hesston, Kansas	02/25/16	<a href="#">Link</a>

Each article was individually analyzed first using fantasy theme analysis. After analyzing all twenty total articles, the articles were again sorted into their four categories, where narratology was used to identify, compare, and contrast the overarching storylines within and between media categories.

To begin, the researcher analyzed each of the twenty articles individually using elements of fantasy theme analysis, where any mentioned characters, settings and actions were recorded. First, the researcher analyzed the individual article for characters mentioned and highlighted them with one color of highlighter. The researcher also noted how many times a character was mentioned within each article. After highlighting all characters within the article, the researcher then analyzed the same article for any settings mentioned, highlighting them with a different colored highlighter. Again, the researcher noted how many times the settings were mentioned within the article.

Finally, after highlighting all settings within the article, the researcher analyzed the same article for any actions mentioned, using a third highlighter color and noting how many times each action was mentioned in the article. This three-step process was used to determine characters, settings and actions for each of the twenty articles analyzed. After highlighting the applicable content in all three categories, the researcher compiled the information into a Microsoft Excel data spreadsheet for ease of tracking and comparison across articles. Once all data from the twenty articles was input into the spreadsheet, they were analyzed for similarities and differences.

After using components of fantasy theme analysis to identify character, setting, and action themes in media articles, narratology was subsequently applied to determine

the overarching storyline and tenor of each article. Additionally, comparisons were made across all articles within one media outlet category (local, regional, national and international), and then across media outlet categories. Using the data elements from fantasy theme analysis as a foundation, the researcher applied those themes along with quotations from the articles to determine and elaborate the most prominent storylines of each article. For instance, if the article was a piece solely focused on the assailant, his background, criminal history, and family life, the researcher would categorize that article differently in comparison to another article that focused on the citizens of Hesston, the Hesston community, and their reactions and thoughts about the event. Even if Cedric Ford were referenced in the second article, if the overarching nature of the narrative in the second article was primarily focused on the citizens and their reactions, the researcher would classify the articles as different with respect to the character theme.

### **3.6 Part Two: Qualitative Interviews Procedures**

#### **3.6.1 Participant Recruitment**

The Institutional Review Board at Wichita State University granted approval for this study on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017 (Wichita State University, IRB #3826). The recruitment process for participants was executed through scripted emails (Appendix B) sent to potential interviewees inviting them to take part in this study. The researcher started by reaching out to community professionals who spoke with media outlets after the Hesston shooting, as well as those who were identified as members of the post-crisis task force. If participants did not feel qualified or were unwilling to be interviewed themselves, the researcher respectfully asked them for names of other community professionals they identified who would be more appropriate to interview. The

researcher then continued reaching out to prospective participants via email until ten participants were willing to schedule interviews. At that point, the researcher stopped the recruitment process.

The final ten interview participants ranged from community professionals who worked for Hesston and/or Harvey County, to school administrators, ministers, and local journalists. Each participant had experienced the incident at Excel Industries in a distinctly different capacity from the other participants. Each participant also responded to the crisis uniquely from the other participants, based on their professional capacity and what they were assigned to assist with.

### **3.6.2 Participant Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Inclusion criteria for recruiting participants for this research included community professionals in the cities of Hesston or Newton and Harvey County who were directly involved in the post-tragedy crisis task force within 24 hours of the 2016 Hesston Excel Industries shooting. Participants were interviewed within their professional capacities, not as private citizens or residents. Community professionals included city staff, communication liaisons, religious council, and school officials. Exclusion criteria for recruiting participants in this study included minors, persons who were and/or are currently employed at Excel Industries, persons who were inside or around Excel Industries during the shooting, persons who were physically harmed due to the Excel Industries shooting, and any persons who do not wish to be interviewed or audio recorded by the researcher.

### **3.6.3 Interview Structure**

Ten in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted between February 7, 2017 and February 23, 2017. Interview lengths ranged from 27 to 115 minutes with an average of 62.7 minutes. A range of community professionals from different industries were interviewed: two community pastors, three city officials, one community foundation director, two school officials, and one local journalist to answer the second, third, and fourth research questions for this study: RQ2) How did the Hesston/Harvey County community make collective sense of this local crisis? RQ3) How did the Hesston/Harvey County community withstand a national narrative that differed strongly from the local narrative? RQ4) What advice did Hesston/Harvey County community responders have for small / rural communities who might face a local crisis? Seven questions were compiled for the interview protocol for this analysis (Appendix A). The questions involved participant accounts of the impact of the media involvement and coverage of the Excel Industries event: questions about their involvement with the media, their role in the post-crisis task force after the event, their intentional recovery efforts, and advice they might have for small / rural communities that might face a local crisis.

Prior to each interview, an informed consent form (Appendix C) was signed by each of the participants. These consent forms were separated from all other research materials, and no names or identifiers were retained that could potentially be linked to the interviewee's transcript. Additionally, no interviewee' demographics were collected. Thus, identifying information could not be linked to any of the participants. All interviewees were identified by numbers only (i.e. "Interviewee #1") and no names

mentioned by the interviewees were listed during either the audio transcription, or the coding and analysis of the transcribed data.

#### **3.6.4 Data Management**

After interviewing and audio recording the ten individual interviews, the researcher uploaded the MP3 audio files onto a University computer in the researcher's personal office. After uploading the audio files onto the University computer, the audio files were deleted from the audio recorder. Each of the ten audio recordings were played back twice. The first time the audio recording was played back, the researcher typed out a word-for-word transcript of the interviewee's responses to the interview questions in a Microsoft Word document. This included every word spoken by the researcher asking the interview questions and the interviewee's answers to the interview questions. When a person's name (i.e. "I spoke with Jane Doe that evening.") or possible interviewee identifiers (i.e. "I work for Company A.") were stated by the interviewees, the researcher paused the audio recording from playing and highlighted the identifying text in a red color font. This was to prompt the researcher to later change those potential identifiers with pseudonyms to maintain interviewee confidentiality, which was promised by the researcher in the informed consent form. When the word-for-word transcripts of all audio recordings were completed, the MP3 audio recording files were permanently deleted from the University computer.

After a word-for-word transcript was created for all ten audio recordings, the researcher then went back through and played each audio recording a second time. This time, the researcher created data files in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for each

individual interviewee. The data files contained key words, phrases and summary statements in response to each interview question.

For example, if one interviewee said, “I think it was helpful that Hesston community leaders had prior training before the incident at Excel Industries occurred,” that statement would have been written out exactly word-for-word in the raw transcription of the interview. However, in the data file, the summary line for that same interviewee’s statement would be summarized to, “Hesston leaders / training before / helpful for Excel.” The intent of this summarizing method was to allow the researcher to quickly analyze and identify similar words and phrases across interviews in an efficient manner that allowed for the determination of potential main themes and subthemes.

### **3.7 Thematic Analysis**

A thematic analysis approach was used to sort and analyze the interview data with the intent to determine commonalities among multiple interviewee’ responses to interview questions and across interview questions to address research questions. Thematic analysis can be used to analyze qualitative information and gain insight about a person, an interaction, a group, a situation, an organization, or a culture (Howitt & Cramer, 2007). Boyatzis describes thematic analysis as a process for “encoding qualitative information” (1998, p. 39).

To begin the process, the researcher listened to each interviewee’s MP3 audio recording twice, once to transcribe the responses word-for-word, and a second time to create a summarized version of the content in an organized data file. Once transcripts and data files were created, the researcher used thematic analysis to draw out common words, phrases, and overarching themes and subthemes among interviewees. The

researcher highlighted common phrases and keywords in the same font color for all ten interviewees. For example, if Interviewees #3, #5, #8, and #9 all stated the keyword “strong,” or the phrases “Hesston Strong” or “We Are Hesston Strong,” all three examples would be highlighted throughout the data files in the same font color for all four interviewees. After initially highlighting the similar words and phrases, the researcher compared the suggested similar keywords and phrases found in the data files with the word-for-word transcripts.

Regardless of whether the data files suggested a match between two interviewees’ responses, if one interviewee’s word-for-word transcription turned out not to be deemed a match to another interviewee’s word-for-word transcription, the researcher concluded it to be a false match. The researcher then typed a note into both data files indicating the failed match. However, if one interviewee’s word-for-word transcription turned out to confirm the suggested match from the data file to another interviewee’s word-for-word transcription, the researcher then typed a note into both data files indicating the confirmed match, along with a listing indicating where to find the comparable quotations from each word-for-word transcription. This process of comparison was repeated among all ten interviewee data files and raw transcripts until all interviewee data were thoroughly analyzed.

### **3.7.1 Preliminary Analysis**

First level data analysis was intended to determine any preliminary themes and subthemes. The preliminary analysis was a three-step process. In the first step, the researcher identified commonalities in keywords and phrases by interview question across the ten interviewees in the individual data files. Initial analysis was done with

data files, then once grouped information was identified, transcripts were examined to pull quotations and determine that expected commonalities were actual commonalities based on context and language choice. These commonalities were highlighted using different font colors on Microsoft Word and Excel that represented each “group” of common information. For instance, the color red was used to highlight all interviewee responses who discussed the “Hesston Strong” campaign.

After highlighting all initial commonalities, the researcher listed in each interviewee’s individual data file which of their answers were potentially related to other interviewee answers. For instance, if Interviewees #1, #3, #6, and #10 all discussed “Hesston Strong,” a note was made in Interviewee #1’s data file next to their statement about “Hesston Strong” along the lines of “Prelim Match: Int. #3, #6, #10.” Similarly, a note in Interviewee #3’s data file would have read, “Prelim Match: Int. #1, #6, and #10.” This note would have been listed in all four interviewee data files involved in the suggested match. A legend key was kept ensuring font colors were clearly labeled.

After completing the first step of the data analysis for all interviewee data files and transcripts, the researcher then moved on to the second step of the preliminary analysis process. In the second step, the commonalities discovered in the first step of data analysis were then categorized by applicable research question. The researcher used research questions two, three and four for this categorization process. For instance, the “Hesston Strong” campaign that was initially grouped together in the first step of this process was then determined by the researcher to address research question two: *How did the Hesston/Harvey County community make sense of their local crisis?* The researcher categorized all commonalities suggested in the first step of the

preliminary analysis in this fashion until all groups of commonalities were categorized under one of the three research questions or discarded as not relevant.

Finally, after completing the second step of the preliminary analysis, the researcher then moved on to the third step of the preliminary analysis process. In the third step, tentative content listed under research questions two, three and four were analyzed for coherence and titled based on content. For instance, *'recovery' phase emphasis* was listed as an initial main theme for all keywords and phrases from interviewees that discussed the importance, benefits, and/or tangible applications of community recovery efforts after experiencing a local crisis.

After labeling all groups of commonalities, the researcher tentatively determined which groups of commonalities were overarching themes and which were subordinate concepts. Subordinate concepts were determined to be subthemes. The researcher did this by examining the compatibility of groups of content with other groups of content. Themes were considered to cover broad content areas while subthemes were specific content areas subordinate to the broad content areas. For example, *flexibility in roles* was deemed to be a subtheme, based on the number of interviewees who specifically discussed either/or examples of being flexible in the roles they played following the crisis or the importance of being flexible in their professional capacity to meet the needs of the community following the crisis. However, many of the interviewees also expressed the idea that flexible was promoted to them during prior training sessions they had attended before the incident at Excel Industries. Therefore, *flexibility in roles* was classified as a subtheme under the main theme *prior preparation and training*, since being flexible while serving in a professional capacity was taught to interviewees

through prior preparation and training. Initially, ten themes were identified with respect to research questions two, three and four. Further analysis collapsed the initial ten themes into four themes and six subthemes.

### **3.7.2 Confirmatory Analysis**

After the researcher performed an initial analysis of the data to determine preliminary themes and subthemes, a confirmatory analysis was conducted. The researcher examined the four preliminary themes and six subthemes and compared them against the second, third and fourth research questions. This was to ensure the preliminary themes and subthemes were relevant and addressed one of the research questions. Throughout this process, the themes were open to change if the researcher found they were not confirmed to be relevant as suggested during the preliminary analysis. All themes were open to modification and rearrangement throughout this iterative process. The researcher did not assume that the preliminary themes and subthemes would be the same as the final confirmatory themes and subthemes.

Returning to the word-for-word transcripts for a final time, the researcher read the full responses of the interviewees associated with each theme and subthemes to ensure they were still applicable to their designated categories. If the responses were still determined as applicable to the theme or subtheme category, the researcher left interviewees' responses as components of the theme or subtheme. However, if the interviewees' responses no longer fit with the main theme or subtheme, the response was either 1) moved to a theme or subtheme where it better related, or 2) it was discarded. Narratives of the main themes and subthemes were then created from the content and the results of the interviewees' responses in relation to each research

question conceptualized. Comparisons between research questions two, three and four were made to determine whether the content in one research question provided a deeper understanding of the content in another research question.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

**RQ1: How did local, regional, national and international media outlets cover and report the 2016 Hesston, Kansas shooting at Excel Industries?**

#### **4.1 Part One: Media Analysis – Fantasy Theme**

Using fantasy theme analysis and narratology theory, part one of this research study involved comparison of five articles categorized as “local”, five articles categorized as “regional”, five articles categorized as “national”, and five articles categorized as “international;” a total of twenty articles were analyzed. Each article was first analyzed individually. Then all five articles within a category were compared with one another. Next each article was compared with the remaining fifteen articles in the other three categories. Finally, groups of articles within a category were compared with groups of articles within the other categories. Selected articles were randomly chosen from a pool of fifty-six articles in the initial pool of articles. Fifteen of the fifty-six articles were from local media news outlets. Twenty of the fifty-six articles were from regional media news outlets. Fourteen of the fifty-six articles were published in national media news outlets, and seven of the fifty-six articles came from international media news outlets. Fantasy theme analysis was used to highlight and determine the characters, settings, and actions described in each of the articles (Table 2).

TABLE 2

LOCAL, REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

	Local	Regional	National	International
<b>Characters</b>				
Cedric Ford (assailant)	3 (7)	5 (10)	5 (21)	5 (14)
Harvey County Sheriff T. Walton	4 (8)	5 (6)	3 (4)	2 (2)
Police Chief Doug Schroeder	5 (5)	5 (5)	5 (5)	3 (4)
Cedric Ford's Ex-Girlfriend	0 (0)	2 (3)	4 (6)	4 (4)
Mayor David Kauffman	2 (2)	2 (2)	3 (3)	1 (1)
Governor Sam Brownback	0 (0)	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)
President Barack Obama	0 (0)	2 (2)	2 (1)	1 (1)
Hesston EMTs	1 (1)	2 (2)	1 (1)	0 (0)
Excel Industries Employees	5 (8)	4 (12)	3 (9)	3 (8)
Renee Benjamin (victim)	4 (4)	4 (4)	2 (2)	1 (1)
Joshua Higbee (victim)	4 (4)	4 (4)	2 (2)	1 (1)
Brian Sadowsky (victim)	4 (4)	4 (4)	2 (2)	1 (1)
Paul Mullet, Excel CEO	1 (1)	1 (1)	4 (4)	3 (3)
Kansas Senator Forrest Knox	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (2)	2 (2)
Ministerial Alliance Team	5 (7)	4 (5)	2 (2)	1 (1)

Local Regional National International

	Local	Regional	National	International
<b>Settings</b>				
Excel Industries	5 (10)	5 (7)	5 (7)	5 (9)
Hesston (city)	5 (11)	5 (8)	5 (5)	5 (5)
Newton (city)	5 (7)	4 (6)	3 (3)	0 (0)
Cedric Ford's home	0 (0)	2 (2)	5 (8)	0 (0)
Hesston High School	5 (10)	5 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)
churches (Hesston)	5 (11)	5 (7)	1 (1)	0 (0)
King's Park (Hesston)	5 (6)	4 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Local Regional National International

	Local	Regional	National	International
<b>Actions</b>				
shot, shooting, shoot	4 (5)	5 (7)	5 (12)	5 (11)
death, dead	3 (3)	4 (5)	5 (13)	5 (10)
gathered, gathering	5 (7)	5 (5)	3 (3)	2 (2)
forgive, forgiveness	5 (8)	4 (4)	3 (3)	1 (1)
massacre	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (3)	2 (2)
executed	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1)	0 (0)
mourn, mourning	4 (7)	3 (7)	0 (0)	0 (0)
crime, criminal act	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (4)	2 (2)
running, run, ran	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (8)	4 (5)

Table 2 indicates how many of the five articles in each category mentioned the indicated character, setting, or action followed by the number of mentions in parentheses. For instance, where the bolded number “**3**” is listed under the “Local” category next to Cedric Ford, this indicates that the researcher found his name reported in three of the five local articles analyzed, and the “(7)” indicates the number of times his name was stated within the three articles. This means certain articles analyzed in the group of five total articles mentioned Ford’s name more than once in the same article. After using fantasy theme analysis methods to pull the quantitative number of times characters, settings and actions were reported, narratology was applied to find the overarching storyline to determine the tenor of the story and what it did or didn’t contribute to an overall rhetorical vision.

#### **4.1.1 Local Media Results**

Local media outlets analyzed included five articles published online in *The Hesston Record* (3) and *The Kansan* (2). *The Hesston Record* is a local newspaper based out of Hesston, Kansas and *The Kansan* is a local newspaper based out of Newton, Kansas.

##### **4.1.1a Local Media - Characters**

Local media outlets focused heavily on characters directly connected to Hesston, including the ministerial alliance team, Police Chief Doug Schroeder, Harvey County Sherriff T. Walton, Hesston Mayor David Kauffman, the three Excel employee victims, Excel employees, as well as the assailant Cedric Ford. Little to no emphasis was placed on characters not directly connected to Hesston, including Senator Forrest Knox, Governor Sam Brownback, and President Barack Obama.

#### **4.1.1b Local Media - Settings**

The variety of settings were highlighted in local outlets. In fact, the only category local media outlets did not report on, based on this analysis, was Cedric Ford's home. This was a focus of other news outlets because there were initial reports on the evening of the shooting that there was a possible stand-off at Ford's home, which was later reported to be untrue.

#### **4.1.1c Local Media - Actions**

The actions covered and reported in local outlets strayed away from the actual shooting itself and focused more on the community reaction and response. "Gathering" and "forgiveness" were stronger setting themes in local coverage compared to "death" and "shooting." "Mourning" and "running" were also themes mentioned in both *The Hesston Record* and *The Kansan*.

#### **4.1.2 Regional Media Results**

Regional media outlets included five articles written and published online in *The Wichita Eagle* (2), *Hutch News* (1), *KSN* (online) (1), and *KAKE* (online) (1). *The Wichita Eagle*, *KSN* and *KAKE* are all regional media news outlets based in Wichita, Kansas. *Hutch News* is based out of Hutchinson, Kansas.

#### **4.1.2a Regional Media - Characters**

Regional media outlets focused similarly to local media outlets on characters such as Cedric Ford, in addition to Hesston residents and prominent community leaders in Hesston, such as Harvey County Sheriff T. Walton, Police Chief Doug Schroeder, the Excel Industries employees, and the three victims of Cedric Ford. Little to no emphasis

was placed on characters not directly connected to Hesston, including Senator Forrest Knox, Governor Sam Brownback, and President Barack Obama.

#### **4.1.2b Regional Media - Settings**

The settings strongly highlighted in regional outlets were a variety of locations, and again similarly paired with local media outlet results. These settings included the cities of Hesston and Newton, Excel Industries, Hesston High School, and King Park. Different to local media, however, Cedric Ford's home in Newton was mentioned in two of the five articles, each mentioned it one time.

#### **4.1.2c Regional Media - Actions**

Again, the actions covered and reported in regional outlets compared similarly to those in local media outlets. "Gathering," "mourning," and "forgiveness" in relation to the community members of Hesston, Kansas were some of the strongest themes overall. However, "shooting" and variants of the word were strongly represented in the articles, which was less highlighted in local articles.

#### **4.1.3 National Media Results**

National media outlets included five articles written and published online from five media sources in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *CNN*, and *National Public Radio (NPR)*.

#### **4.1.3a National Media - Characters**

National media outlets focused primary on Cedric Ford, the assailant of the Excel Industries shooting. Contrary to local and regional media outlets, national media also focused on Ford's ex-girlfriend, who illegally provided him the weapons he used in the shooting. Out of the five articles analyzed, four mentioned Ford's ex-girlfriend, and

some multiple times, as her name was recorded a total of six times in four out of the five articles. Characters not directly associated with Hesston, such as Kansas Governor Sam Brownback and U.S. President Barack Obama, were also mentioned more times in comparison to local and regional media outlets.

#### **4.1.3b National Media - Settings**

The settings highlighted in national outlets were Hesston as a city where the Excel Industries plant is located. Hesston High School and King's Park had no mentions by national media in the five articles analyzed, and only once did a national media article mention one of the area churches in Hesston, as the head pastor had provided an exclusive interview about the event and how the community was reacting to the tragedy. All five national media articles covered the Thursday evening events surrounding Ford's home in Newton, Kansas.

#### **4.1.3c National Media - Actions**

The actions highlighted in national articles were vastly different in comparison to local and regional articles. "Shooting," "death," "running" and its variants were all primary words used in covering the stories. Many of the national stories focused on the event itself and less on the community response to the tragedy, so words such as "forgiveness," "gathered" and "mourning" were less prevalent. "Massacre" was also used by three of the five national media articles regarding the event, as a massacre is typically defined as a tragedy with four or more people killed because of an event.

#### **4.1.4 International Media Results**

International media outlets included five articles written and published online in *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)* (2), *Global News* (1), and *The Guardian* (2).

*BBC* is a British public service broadcaster, headquartered in London. *Global News* is the news and current affairs division of Global Television Network in Canada, and is headquartered in Burnaby, Canada. *The Guardian* is a British daily newspaper headquartered in Kings Place, London.

#### **4.1.4a International Media - Characters**

The most highlighted characters within the international media articles were assailant Cedric Ford and Excel Industries employees. Like national media, international outlets focused less on individual Hesston community leaders and residents and more on responses from Governor Brownback, Senator Knox, and President Obama. However, international media did mention Excel Industries CEO, Paul Mullet, in three of the five articles analyzed, with Mullet's statement made on behalf of Excel Industries after the incident.

#### **4.1.4b International Media - Settings**

The settings emphasized and highlighted by international media were also comparable to national media outlets. International media focused exclusively on the city of Hesston as home of Excel Industries where the shooting occurred. Contrary to national media outlets, however, international articles did not mention the city Newton or Cedric Ford's home in Newton.

#### **4.1.4c International Media - Actions**

Highlighted actions were, again, comparable to those of national media outlets and less consistent with those in local and regional media outlets. "Shooting," "death," "running," "massacre," and "crime (criminal act)" and its variants were heavily highlighted in each of the five articles analyzed, while "forgiveness" and "mourning"

were less covered. However, international media outlet articles analyzed did not use “execute” as a way of describing Ford’s killing of the Excel victims, unlike one national media article.

## **4.2 Part One: Media Analysis - Narratology**

### **4.2.1 Local Media - Overarching Narrative**

Overall, out of the five articles selected in the local media category, overarching themes topically focused on the reaction of the Hesston community as well as the events post-shooting at Excel Industries. None of the five articles discussed assailant Cedric Ford at length. While they might have mentioned his name, and identified him as the shooter, background about his life or discussion of possible motives were not reported in the articles. Instead, local media articles focused on the recovery efforts of Hesston, and reported informational advice and suggestions on how the readers who wanted to help could respond. One article reported, “Hesston Community Foundation funds would be used to help first responders and rescue workers deal with the tragedy. He [city administrator] also cautioned donors about giving money to a gofundme.com website that has been established.”

The local articles also referred affected readers to counseling services that were available. One local article examined reported, “Anyone seeking counseling services can call 211 or Prairie View Mental Health Center.” Another article was entirely centered around counseling services offered by a local church in Hesston for community members to “gather and give support.” The article quotes a community professional speaking about the ministerial alliance’s goals in assisting the community, “Harvey

County is unique. We take care of our own. We have a lot of existing resources, like Prairie View and the Community Chaplain Response Team.”

The language in local articles were not graphic and used more positive descriptions of the event. One local media article reported on Excel employees exiting the company plant shortly after the shooting occurred, “After the plant was evacuated, hundreds of employees were lined up on the west and south side of the plant. Some exchanged hugs upon finding co-workers.” Local media articles covered neighborhood residents of Hesston who had placed signs on their front lawn reading “Hesston Hustler Strong” or simply “We Are Hesston Strong.” The article explains, “A movement around the Hesston community to show support for Excel has people putting their Excel mowers on their front lawns and in front of their businesses.” It also included a quote from a nearby residential living facility that requested other residents to do the same, “Please join us in this movement as we show our support for the friends, family and community affected by this unfortunate event.”

#### **4.2.2 Regional Media - Overarching Narrative**

Overall, the five articles selected for analysis from the regional media category, focused closely, as local media articles did, on the community events that took place after the shooting (i.e. where community vigils would be held, individual status updates on victims, etc.). Similarly, regional media articles were less focused on the assailant Cedric Ford and his background or possible motivations for his criminal act. Rather, regional media articles analyzed focused heavily on the town hall meeting that occurred the Sunday following the Thursday evening shooting, which spoke about the details surrounding the event itself, as well as the recovery process.

Regional media articles had some but few instances of graphic language to describe the shooting event. In fact, one article analyzed interviewed an Excel employee who spoke of his relationship with assailant Cedric Ford, “He said he considered Ford a close friend.” The article went on to discuss Ford purchasing a truck and driving it to work for the first time, “He [Ford] was happy as all could be...I’m in shock. I mean, we had a normal conversation. I was gonna [sic] help the man out this afternoon.” In one of the more graphic detailing of the event, a regional media article interviewed an Excel employee who discussed how one of the victims was killed, “It was confirmed right away that he was dead...he got shot in the head.”

Another article highlighted one of the Excel employees who was shot twice in the chest and once in his arm and legs during the shooting. The article interviewed the victim while he was lying in a hospital bed at Newton Medical Center in Newton, Kansas, about ten minutes south of Hesston. However, the employee was conscious, holding the hands of his spouse and mother during the interview, and had a positive demeanor overall. While the story was graphic by nature, it was written in a way that didn’t contain intentionally grisly language and descriptors. Additionally, none of the employee’s wounds were seen or shown in the article.

#### **4.2.3 National Media - Overarching Narrative**

Contrary to local and regional media articles, national articles focused heavily on Cedric Ford, the assailant, and the details of the shooting event itself. The language used overall was more descriptive and graphic by nature in comparison to local and regional media outlets. In one national media article examined, an employee of Excel Industries who was a firsthand witness to the shooting and had helped an injured

employee was quoted. The article noted that while the employee was speaking to the media, he “rubbed his hands, which had blood on them.” One headline of a national media article analyzed read, “Shooting rampage tears through quiet Kansas town.” The same article also revealed the identity of the assailant prior to an official statement being released with those details confirmed. The article explained, “Authorities have not officially given the name of the gunman, but multiple co-workers identified the shooter to local media as Cedric Ford.”

Another national media article inaccurately reported that the shooter “was killed in a gunfight with a police officer inside the factory.” However, the police officer involved later recounted that the assailant, Cedric Ford, was shot in the back and that the gunman did not see the officer behind him before he shot the assailant. Thus, the reports of a “gunfight” exchange were an inaccurate representation of the event.

National media articles also focused heavily on Kansas gun regulations and legislation, and compared responses by President Barack Obama and Governor Sam Brownback, particularly in the context of the 2016 election year. In another article, it mentioned that Governor Sam Brownback “offered his condolences to the people of Hesston” via Twitter and that he additionally “ordered flags flown at half-staff” the following day. Overall, less emphasis was placed on the individual community responses by the Hesston residents and the recovery strategies implemented shortly after the shooting, and more emphasis was placed on the tragic event itself rather than speculation about the “whys” of the event. One article ended by quoting Harvey County Sheriff, T. Walton, “This is just a horrible incident that’s happening here. It’s going to be a lot of sad people before this is all over.”

#### **4.2.4 International Media - Overarching Narrative**

After analysis, it was discovered that international media coverage focused less on the reaction of the Hesston residents and the community response and recovery. Instead, international media outlets focused primarily on the facts and description of the event (i.e. what happened, where, who was involved) and the possible motives of the assailant, Cedric Ford. In one international article, they quoted Harvey County Sherriff T. Walton describing that the “attack happened hours after the suspect was served a ‘protection from abuse’ order” and suggested “it could be a possible motive” for the shooting incident. The same article also mentioned Ford’s criminal background, “He had a history of convictions for previous offenses, including burglary, theft, and fleeing from a police officer, according to public records.”

International media outlets also make specific connections to other mass shootings that had occurred outside of Kansas. One article quoted the timeline of the Hesston shooting with a “shooting rampage in Michigan” that happened less than a week earlier, in which a man was “charged with killing six people and wounding two others.” International media outlets also reported the connection between the shooting and the debate surrounding gun control legislation during the 2016 presidential election year. One article reports, “A number of mass shootings in the United States have elevated gun control as a campaign issue in this year’s presidential campaign.”

These findings were contrary to the Pew Research Center (1998) article previously mentioned in the literature. In regards to the coverage surrounding the Excel Industries shooting, local and regional media focused less on the facts of the assailant and more on the descriptive, emotional language surrounding the community reaction

and response. National and international media used descriptive language, but also focused more on the facts of the event overall, when compared to local and regional media.

#### **4.3 Media Artifact Findings and Conclusions**

After this analysis, the researcher concluded there was a notable difference in the characters, settings, actions, and overarching storylines depending on whether the media outlet was local and regional or national and international. Local and regional media outlets focused primarily on Hesston residents and prominent community leaders in Hesston and Harvey County, making little to no mention of state or national actors. National and global media outlets focused on Hesston and Harvey County characters as well, but made more mention and connection to state and/or national characters, such as Kansas Governor Sam Brownback, Kansas Senator Forrest Knox, and United States President Barack Obama.

Although the shooting at Excel Industries took place in one evening, lasting less than thirty minutes cumulatively (4:57pm to 5:23pm), this event had several running narratives among multiple news outlets. In the coverage during the two weeks following the shooting, several narratives were covered and posted online or in print publications with conflicting facts and differing perspectives. This news coverage was readily accessible to both Hesston community residents, as well as anyone else with internet access. These competing narratives led me, the researcher, to wonder how the community leaders of Hesston involved in the response and recovery efforts after the shooting reacted to these media narratives; whether they noticed them at all, how they were affected by them in their response and leadership, and whether they chose to

combat the narratives or simply ignore them. This is where the second part of this research study came occurred, the participant interviews.

**RQ2: How did the Hesston/Harvey County community make collective sense of this local crisis?**

**RQ4: What advice did Hesston/Harvey County community responders have for small / rural communities who might face a local crisis?**

**4.4 Part Two: Qualitative Interviews**

Social constructions emerge through discourse (Elton, 2011). In addressing the second and fourth research questions, two main themes and five subthemes were identified that influenced how community professionals viewed making collective sense of a local crisis (Table 3). The two main themes were *‘recovery’ phase emphasis* and *prior preparation and training*.

TABLE 3  
PARTICIPANT RESPONSES FOR THEMES 1 AND 2

	<b>Theme 1</b>	Subtheme 1.1	Subtheme 1.2	<b>Theme 2</b>	Subtheme 2.1	Subtheme 2.2	Subtheme 2.3
<b>Interviewee</b>	<b><i>‘recovery’ phase emphasis</i></b>	<i>sustaining the community narrative</i>	<i>“We Are Hesston Strong” campaign</i>	<b><i>prior preparation and training</i></b>	<i>prior positive community relationships</i>	<i>flexibility in roles</i>	<i>starting and ending local</i>
<b>1</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>2</b>					<b>X</b>		
<b>3</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>				<b>X</b>	
<b>4</b>			<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	
<b>5</b>					<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
<b>6</b>						<b>X</b>	
<b>7</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>
<b>8</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>		<b>X</b>	
<b>9</b>			<b>X</b>			<b>X</b>	
<b>10</b>		<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>				<b>X</b>

Table 3. An “X” was given to a participant whose interview response was reflective of a theme or subtheme.

For each participant, the prominent discourses were determined by their responses to the interview questions. When interviews were read, ‘recovery’ phase emphasis and

prior preparation and training topics emerged. Five subthemes were identified within the two primary themes. Two subthemes were identified under the first main theme *'recovery' phase emphasis*: 1) *sustaining the community narrative* and 2) *"We Are Hesston Strong" campaign*. Additionally, three subthemes were identified under the second main theme *prior preparation and training*: 1) *prior positive community relationships*, 2) *flexibility in roles*, and 3) *starting and ending local*.

#### **4.4.1 Theme 1: 'Recovery' Phase Emphasis**

Interviewees specifically emphasized the importance of the "recovery phase" of a crisis, which follows the "response" phase. This takes place a week or later following the initial crisis incident, and focuses on redirecting community efforts to help support affected victims, victims' families, and community members in long-term strategies following the event. Therefore, *'recovery' phase emphasis* was the second primary theme in this research study.

Interviewee #3 spoke of the ministerial alliance, a group of clergy in Hesston, and their<sup>2</sup> role in the recovery phase within the community following a local tragedy. "I think one of the other important things that we did as a church and as a ministerial alliance was to just give people space to lament and to feel all of the feelings that were connected, and not to say that negative or like that the feelings that we had referred to as negative as 'bad' but that they were necessary and normal...To normalize some of that...Once you check off all of those boxes, you're 'good to go.' Human feelings and emotions are not like that...You might feel fine one day and the next feel devastated,

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<sup>2</sup> To maintain confidentiality among all participant interviewees, the name, gender, and professional titles were omitted from all participant responses. *They, their, or them* will be used to reference interviewees.

and the next feel fine again. It goes back and forth. We can only go day-to-day...To give place for those feelings to be processed.”

Interviewee #1 highlighted the importance of focusing not just on the immediately known victims, but those involved who might not be portrayed as victims, such as emergency medical services. In Hesston, some of the emergency medical service technicians were nineteen years-old, and had entered the building shortly after the shooter, Cedric Ford, was killed. Interviewee #1 explained, “It’s not all about the victims. What about the young college student first responders? Making sure they get connected with a pastor or counselor to make sure that those students especially had a place to process what they experienced.”

Interviewee #3 discussed the importance of seeing the community as a whole and individually, “See the community as a whole, but also see the individuals within the community. It’s not one or the other, because there is a communal sort of response and need for us to recognize how our stories have shifted and how our experience is now changed by this...You have individuals responding differently and you can’t simply go to the lowest common denominator. The other part is to look for those not being seen or noticed. The terrible phrase is, ‘The squeaky wheel gets the oil,’ and there are those that are suffering silently in the community, and how do you make space for them? To speak their truth and experience. That’s really important.”

Interviewees #1 and #3 both mentioned the importance of not forgetting the long-term recovery goals of the community, especially while handling the short-term goals and immediate “response” to the crisis incident. Both interviewees mentioned the

uniqueness of individuals and how they might respond to a crisis, which means that those affected must be assisted individually to respond to their needs.

#### **4.4.1a Subtheme 1.1: Sustaining the Community Narrative**

Participants had varying ideas and thoughts surrounding the importance of claiming and sustaining community narratives, especially in the wake of heavy media coverage surrounding the event itself. Thus, *sustaining the community narrative* was the first subtheme within the first main theme *'recovery' phase emphasis*. Interviewees #1 and #3 emphasized the importance during the community vigil, which happened the Sunday evening following the Thursday evening shooting, of lighting a candle for all those who died in the shooting, including the assailant Cedric Ford. Interviewee #1 described, "They lit a candle for him. That sent such a strong message to everybody that 'community is everyone.'" I think that set a tone. The ministerial alliance set that tone in the community when they said, 'We're not going to get into a blame game here. We're going to work together to move on.'

Similarly, Interviewee #3 described the process the ministerial alliance followed in the decision to light a candle for Ford, "I was in the meeting where we talked about lighting a candle for Cedric, and I think there wasn't anybody who strongly spoke against it. There was caution, I would say. A healthy level of caution asking if this was the right choice and what it meant. But I think everyone there agreed that factors played into this that made Cedric a victim. That, in no way excuses what happened, but recognizes that life is precious and a life was lost. In that, whether or not a person agrees that was the best choice or only option, I think we recognized that a loss of a life is worth lamenting, and that's what it kind of came down to." Interviewee #7 agreed with

the importance of the community vigil in general, “We had our service on Sunday evening where our ministerial alliance and community leaders were able to share. That’s where people were able to see others they interact with every day.”

Interviewees #3, #7, and #8 described the importance of perpetuating a community narrative, for both community support and national awareness. Interviewee #3 remarked, “I think of the areas that we have control over. We have control over what we do as individuals and we have control over how we might speak truth into our communities. And so sometimes that means, say...we hear this from the media, but this is who we are. Sometimes it means completely ignoring other stuff and just saying, ‘This is who we are and who we want to be.’” Interviewee #7 had a similar, but simpler notion, “Ensuring we have proper supports is really the message we wanted to send throughout.”

Interviewee #8 had several ideas surrounding the claiming of a community narrative that focused on the community portrayal of the event, “And our motto that whole time was: Play our game. This is our community. I said, “The gunman's face and name is not going to be on my front page. He is going to be buried on page ten on a thumbnail. We will have the hard news, but that's not how we are going to define our community.” We were very purposeful. It's so easy to say, “What went wrong.” It's the easy, cowardly way to cover stories. Hesston being a very faith-based community. Very traditional in its values. We wanted to do things respectfully, and as a local newspaper you are the historian of your community.” Interviewee #8 didn’t however, feel it was wrong to capture the “messy” parts of tragedy but that it was about a healthy and respectful balance, “It's about what story and narrative does my community want to put

out there, and being respectful in telling that story honestly. Cause there are some parts that are very ugly, and not being afraid of that ugliness, because that's the pain. You can't pretend it didn't happen. You can't sanitize it, but don't glorify it.”

Interviewee #7 made a point to discuss the larger narrative and perpetuating that within the community, “In the larger narrative, I think what people need to do is find ways to connect with people in their community. Create their own narrative through their friends, their book club, their church, their local paper. Find a way to feel empowered to take it back.” Interviewee #3 also reiterated this idea, focusing on individuals in the community and ensuring their messages were heard, “I just think, in these times, continuing to make our narrative present and known. To listen to the stories of those that are speaking their narrative. Like, the individual people here. Allowing that message to be important.” Interviewee #10 echoed a similar mantra to Interviewees #3 and 7, and the importance of a rapid dissemination of the focused and agreed upon community narrative, “In my opinion, community and local government can counter national and global perspectives by pushing social media, press releases, etc. at a quicker pace...There are few instances where a team should allow the national and global perspective to deviate from the image, the present, and the project.”

Finally, Interviewee #8 suggested how best to connect within a community after tragedy, “Treat everyone like your grandma. Because when you -- I guess, living in the community and being a member and an active member of the community, if you cry with them, if you -- don't be afraid to say, ‘I hurt too, and I want to help us as a community get through this hurt together.’”

Interviewees #1, #3, #7, #8 and #10 all discussed the importance of creating and sustaining the Hesston community narrative as quickly as possible. With several of them referencing their awareness of the multiple narratives that were being perpetuated by different media outlets, the idea of being “present and known” was an important factor in maintaining community morale and hope, particularly in the wake of this local tragedy.

#### **4.4.1b Subtheme 1.2: “We Are Hesston Strong” Campaign**

The shooting at Excel Industries occurred around 5:30 pm on a Thursday, and by 10:00am on Friday morning, the site [www.HesstonStrong.com](http://www.HesstonStrong.com) was online and active, prompting site visitors to download a PDF form that simply read in bright yellow with black, red and white letters, “WE ARE #HESSTONSTRONG” (Figure 1). This prompted the second subtheme, “*We Are Hesston Strong*” campaign, within the first main theme, ‘recovery’ phase emphasis.



Figure 1. “We Are #HesstonStrong” flyer

A few participants had observations regarding the effectiveness of the campaign and what it did within the Hesston community. Interviewee #1 stated, “What the ‘Hesston Strong’ creator did was publicity.” Interviewee #4 remarked on the creator’s intent around starting the campaign, “I think the creator of the ‘Hesston Strong’ campaign was

so well-intentioned...He was incredibly well-intentioned. It was his town. He wanted to do something.” Interviewee #7 further elaborated on the intention of community leaders as they advanced the campaign, “As far as that message that we wanted to send, we talked about that idea of ‘Hesston Strong,’ which you see that a lot in community response to a lot of different things, but it's important that message is sent: that we will recover and come together as a community.” The beginnings of this campaign started as one individual’s effort that was not even initiated by a community responder or someone part of emergency management. However, shortly after its creation, the campaign was claimed by all community leaders involved and was heavily promoted in the days and weeks following the shooting.

Interviewee #10 discussed the impact of the “Hesston Strong” campaign for the community and the importance of that message to recovery. “The harmful nature is why we crafted our message ‘Hesston Strong.’ Through the difficulties of the incident and the darkness that took over this town. We knew we needed to be a light in that darkness. A ‘rally around the flag’ type of movement. ‘Hesston Strong’ was what changed the moment of the recovery for us. It got people to focus on the days ahead, to find strength in the community, to utilize their resources and capabilities to help recover. It was a display of a unity of effort that ended up driving the ‘whole community response.’ How do you take the strengths, capabilities, and efforts of your local community and get them, all of them, moving toward a single common goal? Doing that takes a unity of effort through a whole community approach. What were we moving toward? Societal restoration, or as close to it as we can possibly get.”

Interviewees #1, #4, #7, and #10 all remarked on the specific importance of the “Hesston Strong” campaign and its immediate and long-term community impact. By allowing the community to focus on a simple, straightforward, consistent and positive message, it shifted focus from the crisis and the negative impacts it could have on individuals and the community as a whole and emphasized community strength, connection and support.

#### **4.4.2 Theme 2: Prior Preparation and Training**

*Prior preparation and training*, the second primary theme in this research study, was discussed at length by multiple participants, many of whom relied on prior training they had received shortly before the event. Interviewee #4 recalls a community-wide training event, “Interestingly, we did do a community-wide training that they called a ‘table top’ exercise. Now it wasn’t a shooting scenario. It was basing it around a natural disaster...Really, some of that, even though we were talking about a severe ice storm, and the havoc that can wreak on a community. So, while an ice storm and a shooting are two different events, some of that in the way it plays out, our role really came to be true in this situation. So really, that was helpful for us. I had my head wrapped around some things that might happen.” Participant #9, who had been part of the same ‘table top’ scenario training as Interviewee #4, stated simply, “We had some structure going into it.”

Interviewee #8 indicated the importance of a prior County-wide meeting between emergency medical services and fire personnel, “Two weeks before the shooting happened, they actually had a Harvey County meeting between EMS and fire personnel. It was a training session on mass casualties not even ten days before. But

they had those training sessions already and that kind of mindset that it can and will happen here, and we want to be prepared but hopeful.”

Interviewee #8 looked back at the Hesston tornado in 1990 and recalled how the same leadership in 2016 had experienced the community devastation of the tornado and had subsequently put systems in place to address future community crises, “The 1990 Hesston tornado also helped because [those in leadership] already had an established command center for how we would deal with a crisis. We had people in leadership who had experience with that kind of thing.” Interviewee #4 reiterated the importance of preparation, “When the doo-doo hits the fan, the preparation you’ve got is the best you’ve got.” Interviewee #10 remarked the substantiality of their training, “Yes, there has been a substantial amount of training and exercise provided to me related to communication crisis and risk training. Both before and after the [Excel] incident.”

Interviewees #4, #8, #9, and #10 expressed the importance of having preparation plans and training in place before a crisis, and gave specific examples pertaining to the advanced training they had received. Many of them claimed that it allowed them to have a level of foundation and knowledge going into the chaos of the situation, and that they understood what was needed and expected on them in their professional capacities.

#### **4.4.2a Subtheme 2.1: Prior Positive Community Relationships**

Several participants were quick to convey the community interaction between different organizations and professionals, and expressed positive overall relationships among the different groups (i.e. school officials, city staff, community foundation directors, clergy, local reporters). Thus, *prior positive community relationships* was the first subtheme under *prior preparation and training*. Interviewee #1 made it a point to

acknowledge that the city of Hesston, and even Harvey County had been “developing these relationships for years” prior to the shooting at Excel Industries.

Interviewee #1 went on to discuss at length the different elements that operate within Hesston, to the surprise of surrounding cities in Kansas. “If you develop a strong sense of community every other day of the year, then your resiliency will already be built in. What about other communities that don't have similar resources to Hesston? Working in the social service world, I cannot tell you how many people come for meetings or in a consultative way and they say, ‘My gosh! First of all, you have resources. Second of all, you talk to each other. You work collaboratively and cooperatively with each other.’ People come here from Wichita and don't understand. It's an expectation in Harvey County. Regardless if it's because some guy came in and killed other people or if we're addressing poverty or childhood obesity. The expectation is that everybody is going to come to the table and work together.”

Interviewee #2 echoed a similar statement about the importance of community prior to tragedy, “You develop the strong sense of community the rest of the time.” Interviewee #5 also stated similar sentiments, “We are pretty fortunate in our community that among our local police and Harvey County officers and our EMTs, our city administrators, our school people - there's very positive relationships there - and that we're going to work well together.” Interviewee #7 described the strong collaboration within the leadership of the city, “I think we had great leadership from the beginning from our city officials, our emergency officials, and just the great support we have from the community already.”

Interviewee #5 made a point to describe surprise at how many individuals were working together and involved during a town hall meeting held the Sunday after the Thursday evening shooting, “I couldn’t believe the number of people involved in that.” Interviewee #5 also made mention of the importance of having these groups established before crises occur, “If you’re looking for answers in the moment, that’s really hard to manage, frankly. The answer is that there has got to be some good relationships amongst a number of different groups of people and agencies and some coordination beforehand.”

Interviewees #1, #2, #5 and #7 all reiterated similar ideas regarding the importance of establishing relationships among community leaders and professionals prior to a crisis. The development of relationships allows for an effective and more efficient workflow when navigating a crisis during either the response or recovery phases. Hesston and Harvey County sought to ensure these relationships were in place beforehand, and regardless of the different professions and level of crisis experience among them, responders could cohesively work together with already established connections and relationships in place as they negotiated the crisis together.

#### **4.4.2b Subtheme 2.2: Flexibility in Roles**

One of the strongest subthemes that emerged in this study was the idea of roles played after the crisis and the emphasis and importance of flexibility within and among roles. *Flexibility in roles* was the second subtheme theme in this research study under the second main theme, *preparation and training*. Almost all participants could describe a personal experience where they had to transition their role in the response and/or recovery phases following the shooting as new needs surfaced in the community.

Interviewee #1 had a specific experience in coordinating mental health and counseling services for the victim's families and Excel employees in the city's high school gymnasium immediately following the shooting, "I just thought, 'We lost all of our mental health. They've left.' So, we had to redirect who would be a counselor. We had to ask the school personnel to act as counselors." Interviewee #1 also shared what they tell others in a similar professional capacity, "I'm not going to tell you what your role is. It all depends on what your resources are at the time of the event." Rather, Interviewee #1 focused on the importance of knowing your resources ahead of time, "It's all about the awareness and the relationship building ahead of time. Understanding who to call. Being able to text them."

Interviewee #3 shared a similar experience of role shifting, "One of the other things that I ended up doing was that I ended up taking several of the interviews from media that came. I also spent most of my day in there just because that's, just because where I felt most useful and called to...Playing to our strengths and bringing groups of people together that have similar strengths is really important." Interviewee #3 also discussed the ministerial alliance in Hesston as a whole and their flexibility in collaborating together, "But we [the ministerial alliance] recognized that we had a role to play in the spiritual and emotional recovery. But there were other groups who came together to meet physical needs...Different pastors have different levels of comfortability with counseling. For me, it's always been, 'Know your limit and refer, refer, refer.' But there are different levels to help respond with the emotional element as well."

Interviewee #4 discussed their own role and touched on their observations of others shifting into differing roles during key transitions, "A big part for me was simply

helping with facility needs for those agencies who came into town who needed to serve a purpose for the investigation or helping in some aspect...we played that support role for what we needed to do. Which lights to turn on, whether you need coffee made. Whatever the case was for that evening...I filled with whatever they needed on that particular day. We were asked for our building to be used for the Sunday events so there was myself and two to three others who worked a lot that weekend with setting up." In regards to others, Interviewee #4 had positive feedback, "People were on it, and when I say that I mean in a number of different capacities. When those outside agencies came in, they got fed. There were people that put food together all of a sudden. There was food, there was water and coffee, and those outside agencies noticed that."

Interviewee #6 had a similar experience with transitioning roles in the days following the shooting, "As we started to create connections, people who had a little bit more information, we were able to kind of assess that there was no longer a direct threat and were able to start letting people leave. At that point on, as we transitioned from being in a transition where we couldn't identify what was happening to knowing, you know, that we were getting ready to experience a heavy need for our facilities, and the role started to change at that point...so really our administrative team moved into a facilitator role for facilities."

Interviewee #8 commented specifically on the cooperation between everyone and how those transitioned roles, even with mere concerned Hesston residents, seemed immediate and natural, "The inter-agency cooperation. The people in the city

were just on-point, even in the community itself. People who, that night, offered their homes to get coffee and use the bathroom.”

Interviewee #9 made mention of their initial role after the tragedy and how it wasn't established right away, “Initially, I was part of unified command structure that wasn't established until twenty-five or thirty minutes into the incident, so it wasn't part of the initial response, but shortly afterwards. I was part of three people who made up unified command.”

Interviewees #1, #3, #4, #6, #8, and #9 all discussed instances throughout the response and/or recovery phases of the crisis where their roles deviated from the normal scope of operations and their usual community professional capacity into something else. It was important for the interviewees to mention that there was support given to them while they transitioned into these abnormal roles, but that they were flexible in doing so for the common good, the goal being to sustain the community and provide adequate support as quickly and effectively as possible.

#### **4.4.2c Subtheme 2.3: Starting and Ending Local**

The final subtheme under the second main theme, *preparation and training*, was *starting and ending local*. Hesston was immediately flooded with state and federal agencies lending aid, including, but not limited to, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Kansas Crisis Intervention Team. However, all agencies made it clear to some of the participants interviewed that they were simply part of the “response” phase and that they would eventually, and as quickly as possible, start to transition their help to other members of the Hesston community to sustain long-term recovery.

Interviewee #7 expressed sentiments regarding the transition from state and federal entities to local community members. “The transition started as soon as Saturday evening. I was not super excited about it; whenever we had a press conference I was super nervous about it, but that was the point where they talked about. So, I was really learning... That transition, I think, really started to begin then. That continued into Sunday as we had a community town hall style meeting where people were invited to come in and ask questions and that type of thing, which was good.”

Interviewee #10 was part of the team that decided to place Interviewee #7 as a spokesperson when the transition from state and federal resources to local resources started to take place, “We intentionally put local faces in front of the camera and used the remaining national media to project the information for the recovery effort.”

Interviewee #1 also commented on a similar experience in their professional role within the community, “I decided then and there that our role was not to raise money... I texted a pastor and asked if they needed anything else, and they said they needed a ‘connector.’ I turned around and basically didn’t leave [Hesston] for five days. So, my role then turned into a support capacity and logistics division of incident command. They said they needed three meals a day for 180 people for the next three days. Go. So, I sat in a trailer with my cell phone and a legal pad, and phone calls were pouring in. I fielded all of that. So, my role shifted purely into logistics and making sure that the first responders were cared for. That was my role from then on out.”

Interviewees #1, #7 and #10 identified transitions into specific assistance roles initially held by state or federal responders during the “response” phase of the Excel Industries crisis. As the transition started to turn to local roles and community leaders,

interviewees were required to perform outside of their normal scope of work in order to move into the “recovery” phase of the crisis and start the local transition of leadership.

**RQ3: How did the Hesston/Harvey County community withstand a national narrative that differed strongly from the local narrative?**

In addressing the third research question, two primary themes were identified that influenced how community professionals viewed withstanding differing narratives reported and perpetuated by media outlets (Table 4): *positive media interactions* and *negative media interactions*.

TABLE 4  
PARTICIPANT RESPONSES FOR THEMES 3 AND 4

Interviewee	Theme 3	Subtheme 3.1	Subtheme 3.2	Theme 4	Subtheme 4.1	Subtheme 4.2
	<i>positive media interactions</i>	<i>media content and access</i>	<i>strategic media use</i>	<i>negative media interactions</i>	<i>negotiating uncertainty</i>	<i>ignoring media coverage</i>
1		X	X		X	X
2	X					
3	X					X
4	X	X			X	
5		X				
6	X	X	X			
7	X				X	X
8				X		X
9		X				X
10		X	X	X		

Table 4. An “X” was given to a participant whose interview response was reflective of a theme or subtheme.

When interviews were analyzed, positive media interactions and negative media interactions emerged as themes in the data. Four subthemes were identified within the two primary themes. Two subthemes were identified under the first main theme *positive media interactions*: 1) *media content and access* and 2) *strategic media use*.

Additionally, two subthemes were identified under the second main theme *negative media interactions*: 1) *negotiating uncertainty* and 2) *ignoring media coverage*.

#### **4.4.3 Theme 3: Positive Media Interactions**

*Positive media interactions*, the third primary theme in this research study, was discussed at length by multiple participants, many of whom reported positive and/or productive interactions with the media at varying times throughout the two weeks following the Excel Industries incident on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

Interviewee #2 described two separate experiences with two regional media outlets, *The Wichita Eagle* and *KSN*. “There’s a few different outlets and ways that people contacted me. On Friday, I was contacted by *The Wichita Eagle* by a writer that works there, a journalist...I think we played phone tag back and forth on voicemail for a little bit of me just trying to say, ‘This is when I can be available.’ She was workable about that. I think she did a really nice job of connecting with people at the college and different churches in town and put together a nice article for *The Wichita Eagle*.” The same interviewee had similarly positive feedback regarding their experience with regional media news outlet *KSN News*, Wichita, KS, “Especially when *KSN* came, he was very considerate of my time and wanted to set it up at a time that would be appropriate, and we talked for a while before the interview started.”

Interviewee #3 made mention of a regional media experience while negotiating the filming of the Sunday morning church service following the Thursday evening shooting, “Our Sunday service was filmed [by *KAKE News*, Wichita, KS]. They had called and asked for permission. We debated and decided that it would be okay. They were very amenable to our restrictions. We said they had to be in the back of the sanctuary and out of the way, and no filming of the children whatsoever. They were

good about that...I think a pretty good experience. There were definitely different perspectives on that though.”

Interviewee #4 and #6 also echoed positive, collaborative interactions with the media. Interviewee #4 specifically commented on where the media set up in town and how that affected their work, “As it worked out, the media that were in town...there wasn't any issues with that too. They were set up across the street and down by the South Excel lot. We didn't experience a lot where we had to tell them they couldn't drive up to the school. But we also prepared for that.” Interviewee #6 described two incidents with media interactions, “I was already starting to get contacted by the media outlets that they wanted to get set up in our parking lot. We put a team together, our crisis team, which is an existing team, to ensure that we had supervision throughout the campus so that no kid would be approached by any reporters and they could get into the building without any type of problems.”

In a second incident, Interviewee #6 described, “We actually had a couple of different local reporters who were setting up right outside the [high school] gym, or the front high school doors, and that wasn't a good place from them. I had learned somehow that there was media posting up at King Park, where news conferences were taking place, so I was able to create a connection right away with several people I got to know very well over the weekend. In a nutshell, I would say people were very good to work with for the most part... I didn't have a lot of experience with television media or newspaper and that type of thing before, but they were very friendly and respectful, but also persistent at the same time. Sometimes you would have to tell them two or three times to do this or that, but for the most part it was a pretty good relationship.”

Interviewee #7 expressed similar positive sentiments in regards to the media, “They [the media] learned right away what our rules were so they would set up across the street. We wanted to have a strong presence, so many of our community leaders would be around to make sure that the students were not approached by folks. Once we explained that to the reporters they were more respectful of that. As the weekend went on, it was a constant presence no matter where you were. However, I felt like they were trying to send a good, positive message too.” Additionally, Interviewee #7 recounted an experience with the media during a formal press conference, “The only experience I have with non-local or regional media was during the press conference on Saturday evening. There were some other entities there, but for the most part it was people who understood the area and Hesston.”

Overall, Interviewees #2, #3, #4, #6, and #7 recounted positive interactions with the various media outlets throughout the time they were present after the incident. This included interactions during press briefings, phone requests for interviews, requesting access to film in certain locations around Hesston, and respecting filming requests when negotiating which events would be filmed. However, it was also indicated that some of the interactions did require interviewees to be firm on negotiating where media could set up their equipment and who they could film (i.e. no minors) throughout the two weeks following the incident, particularly the weekend immediately following the incident.

#### **4.4.3a Subtheme 3.1: Media Content and Access**

*Media content and access* was the first subtheme in the third primary theme, *positive media interactions*. It was another one of the strongest subthemes in the

research study. Overall, the content in this area centered around media strategy and engagement, with establishing a point of information contact being one crucial factor in that overall strategy. Several participants, when asked about their involvement with the media, referred to a designated point of information contact who collaborated most with the media outlets, and the importance of that established contact.

Interviewee #1 discussed the role of the public information officer and what that role served, “The public information officer is relaying the facts. These are the facts. We don’t have opinions. We don’t have anything else. These are the facts.” Interviewee #9 also discussed the role of the public information officer and the importance of the dissemination of information to the media and public, “When you looked at Incident Command System, part of that teaches you that there’s a need to correlate the dissemination of information, and you need to have that avenue that everybody gets their common message out through the public information officer.”

Interviewee #6 discussed how Harvey County leadership came together shortly after the shooting and the process in selecting who was going to serve that role, “We were able to choose who would be primary contact, and that’s what we did. We didn’t have “turf wars” about it.” Interviewee #4 also commended the leadership who represented the city of Hesston and Harvey County in the media, “As a community, we did well to work together on communicating with the media. I think they worked really hard at that and worked to be on the same page. We were very fortunate to have people who, in our community, who could represent us well in a tough situation. I think that was a benefit for us as far as sharing a message.” Interviewee #10 also mentioned the importance of all local governments having a designated point of information officer,

“Local government must have point of information officers. In the future, they will likely need public relations support as well. When atypical incidents like this occur, I firmly believe that you call in an incident management team to support and address the incident. They can even bring point of information staff with them for these elements if needed. The Excel Industries incidence is a solid case study as to why they should do this.”

In addition to the importance of selecting a public information officer for logistical purposes, Interviewee #6 discussed the basic importance of having communication channels between those who knew when the situation was contained at Excel Industries and was no longer a threat to the community. Interviewee #6 described, “So we had a team come in immediately. Kind of a hand-picked team of professionals that came in who handled crisis situations as part of their background and training. They were outside folks, but people from the area. They understood our community and that type of thing. They organized us.”

Additionally, Interviewee #6 mentioned similar issues with initial communication, as cell phones apparently weren't getting strong signals, so they had to find an alternative method, “We were able to get radios to one another. That way, all of the buildings could be in communication with one another. At that point, we were still operating on very little information, so it was important that we could communicate what little we did know.”

Interviewees #1, #4, #6, #7, #9 and #10 each expressed similar ideas around the importance of having a designated point of information officer who was in charge of direct contact with the media and all dissemination of information. The point of

information officer was a deliberate choice to designate and sustain throughout the event in order to ensure information was communicated to the media as quickly, but accurately, as possible. The role of the point of information officer was not to perpetuate any sort of public relations for Hesston or Harvey County, but simply to relay factual information as it came in to the appropriate media channels for public distribution.

#### **4.4.3b Subtheme 3.2: Strategic Media Use**

*Strategic media use* was the second subtheme in the third primary theme, *positive media interactions*. Some interviewees had thoughts regarding the intentional dissemination of factual, accurate information to media outlets covering the Excel Industries incident. Interviewee #10 explained the collaboration that took place between the media and the community administrators who were looking to use the media to get out helpful resources and information to the families of the victims and affected community members, “It was helpful...helpful in that we could disseminate information and share important elements, such as where to donate and community events.”

Interviewee #6 also commented on the importance of sharing intentional messages with the community to maintain morale in the midst of the crisis, “I think that it was a benefit for us as far as sharing a message.” According to Interviewee #1, the incident management team, along with city administrators, held, “four or five briefings a day” and that information was usually reported shortly thereafter to media outlets waiting for an update. It was important, according to Interviewee #1, that the information was delivered as fast as possible to the media so they didn’t attempt to seek information through unauthorized channels out of impatience.

Interviewees #1, #6, and #10 all reported that, in their experience handling the media, there were mostly accurate and comprehensive reports that were communicated to their audiences. This also allowed important information that community professionals and administrators wanted released immediately to be disseminated to the general public in a rapid fashion.

#### **4.4.4 Theme 4: Negative Media Interactions**

While many of the interviewees described productive and/or respectful interactions with media outlets, some interviewees had negative interactions with the media leading them to be cautious about media engagement. Thus, the fourth and final main theme of this research study was categorized as *negative media interactions*.

Interviewee #8 in particular displayed a great deal of mistrust of media, particularly national media outlets who called in requesting information on the shooting, as well as regional reporters who didn't cooperate with privacy demands. Interviewee #8 explained, "FOX or CNN -- I don't remember -- called and wanted to talk to me. I told them I had a job to do that didn't involve them. But they wanted to know if I was there and on scene. They heard I was one of the first ones there, and I told them I wouldn't do their job for them."

Interviewee #8 also described a moment of frustration when observing how some media outlets rejected the privacy wishes by Excel Industries personnel the day before the employees were set to go back to work two weeks following the shooting, "The day before Excel opened, when they had employees do a walk through, I was so mad that there were media trucks there. Excel even put up a green privacy fence, and there was

a jerk who actually had their camera over the fence panning around. So, yeah, I definitely saw those kinds of behaviors.”

Interviewee #10 experienced a similar frustration with the media, as far as the intentions of the media when reporting the story. However, Interviewee #10 also stated this was not an uncommon thing to expect from media, particularly national outlets. They explained, “[The media] was helpful and harmful. Harmful in the fact that it generates a lot of negative nature. They are often after a story and, in order to tell the story, it’s gonna [sic] cause hurt to people. I believe the local level coverage was more sympathetic in telling the story. The national and international media were clearly there for a story only.” It should be noted that both Interviewees #8 and #10 stated a certain level of anti-media expectations going into crisis response.

Additionally, Interviewee #10 goes on to suggest the importance of factoring in the general timeline of national media, “The negativity, or hook of this incident, were present in the initial days, but those flames burned out quickly. It’s very common with national media. They start with their breaking news, use affiliate stations to feed them information, and once they get their regular media on the ground, they tell the story they want to tell. Once that ends, they leave...We know this. We were waiting for it.”

Interviewees #8 and #10 both made remarks surrounding the motivations and possible intentions of the media outlets, and the importance of navigating through false information in the media, conflicting reports during the initial event crisis, and the potential harmful nature of the media’s intentions. However, it should be noted that, overall, interactions with the media were mostly reported by interviewees as a positive

experience, and not a negative one. Perhaps this involves approaching the media with a general caution going into the “recovery” phase of the crisis model.

#### **4.4.4a Subtheme 4.1: Negotiating Uncertainty**

Since several media crews had entered the city of Hesston the same evening as the shooting, and were reporting stories before the first press conference took place, misinformation in the media was an unsurprising topic of discussion from several participants. *Negotiating uncertainty* was the first subtheme in the fourth main theme, *negative media interactions*. Interviewee #1 described their personal frustration with reports perpetuated claiming the assailant, Cedric Ford, might have been bullied at work due to being African-American, a claim which was later redacted. Interviewee #1 explains, “There was some national coverage where he tried to turn it into a race-based event. He had tried to say that Cedric Ford was bullied by his co-workers for his race. I think that was the only media coverage I saw where I went, ‘Oh, forget it.’”

Interviewee #4 also expressed similar sentiments regarding the media and navigating misinformation, particularly in the timeframe immediately following the shooting, “The hard thing was managing information. You get a lot of bad information; you know? [We were told] there was three shooters, there was two shooters, there was one shooter in the building and one still out in the car, there was one out in a vehicle by the middle school. You know? You just don't know. So, I just don't know what I am about to see or expect. You don't know what's going on. We did the best we could with what we had... Just kept getting information that may or may not have been true and waited for the situation to get contained.”

Interviewee #7 elaborated on the importance of receiving accurate information regarding the security and containment of the threat at Excel Industries, “It was another 30 minutes by the time we could confirm our buildings were totally secured...We were getting all kind of, at that point, misinformation from people. Part of the challenge was not having any direct access to anyone who knew what was going on or if there was still a threat. The rumor was that there was a second shooter at that point, because of two shootings taking place in different locations in Harvey County.” Per Interviewee #7, this misinformation was coming from both early reporting media outlets as well as community leaders who only held pieces of information and couldn’t provide additional details right away.

Interviewees #1, #4 and #7 recounted instances of inaccurate and conflicting reports perpetuated by the media immediately following the crisis. Whether it was in the initial reporting before the crisis was officially deemed as “contained” by local law enforcement, or in subsequent media articles with inaccurate reports claiming that Ford might have been bullied at work. Tying in with this subtheme’s main theme, *negative media interaction*, false information and inaccurate reporting caused chaos among certain interviewees in their professional capacity as they tried to determine when the immediate crisis was no longer a threat.

#### **4.4.4b Subtheme 4.2: Ignore Media Coverage**

The second subtheme from the fourth main theme, *negative media interactions* that emerged in interviewee responses was *ignoring media coverage*. Simply put, many participants stated, whether on a personal or professional basis, that if they were to give advice to another community like Hesston after experiencing a local crisis, ignoring the

media during the “response” phase of the crisis was crucial, both for logistical and emotional purposes. Interviewee #1 stated, “Ignore it. I think it’s unfortunate because, politics aside, we are now, even a year later [since the Excel Industries shooting], it’s even more commonplace for people to speak without filters. So, we’re all going to have to develop a thicker skin or develop our voices. One or the other.” Interviewee #1 described how Hesston residents talked about the media crews camped at King Park in a corner lot in the middle of the city, “They already felt vulnerable enough and now they had to drive past all those media trucks. They felt invaded and vulnerable. We were there for the families, and the first responders, and the people impacted. The media was there to get the scoop, and they couldn’t believe that we weren’t as equally interested in the scoop as they were.”

Interviewee #3 described their experience with the different narratives portrayed by the media and their reaction to it, “I did pay attention to the things on television. I don’t know if this is vanity, but I did want to know how I was represented...When it came to the national stuff, I definitely noticed [a different narrative]. The coverage of that had more to do with gun laws and with the ‘monster behind the mask’ and that sort of stuff. I tended to just not pay attention to it, or tried not to...in the midst of everything, it wasn’t helpful.” Interviewee #4 commented that the national media seemed to leave as quickly as they came, “As far as national media goes, this was almost a blip. It wasn’t a week’s worth of news. It was a quick-hitter in a lot of ways.”

Interviewee #4 then went on to discuss how the different agency workers who came in were all fed for free by community donations and volunteers cooking meals, and how those stories were never covered by national and international media, “They

probably never saw that. That's not a big part of the story, you know? But at the fire station? There were tables full of food and water. People were taken care of. If you were working in it, you saw all of it."

Interviewee #7 expressed a similar negative reaction to the national media and questioned their intentions, "Politically, people, especially from a national level, are going to move the narrative in the direction they want. For us, it was never about any of that. It was about taking care of the people." Interviewee #8 expressed simply, "Turn off the television and get off Facebook" as a method of coping with news stories directly following and covering a local crisis, especially on an emotional level. Interviewee #8 continued, "It's really hard to care what CNN or some redneck in Alabama thinks of you, or some socialite thinks of you when your neighbor's brother is in the hospital. It's hard to care about that."

Interviewee #9 echoed similar sentiments for logistical efficiency, "If you get drawn into the emotions of the media and the community reactions, you lose that focus. So, you don't watch those things until they are done." Interviewee #10's statements agreed with Interviewee #9, "For what I do, I just know that I need to be focused on one thing. I've had great mentors and they have all said the same thing. Don't follow media, even if you go home. Keep it to your loved ones. I tried to do that the first three to four days."

Interviewees #1, #3, #4, #7, #8, and #9 all gave similar straightforward advice to other small and/or local communities who may, hypothetically, find themselves in a similar situation like Hesston in the future. Ignoring the media and the false narratives and inaccurate reports are important to maintain self-care, as well as community unity

and resilience. Instead, focusing on the narrative being perpetuated by the local media, as well as the point of information officer and community professionals, is the primary focus during both the “response” and “recovery” phases of a crisis.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This two-part study containing both a media analysis of local, regional, national and international articles, as well as thematically analyzed semi-structured qualitative interviews, allowed for the identification of four major themes in relation to effective community response tactics amid a sudden local crisis. This study identified the presence of Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Model (CERC) elements and tactics (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005) to utilize within small and/or rural communities, with testimony from community professionals giving credibility to these methods and their effectiveness in addressing the 2016 Excel Industries shooting in Hesston, Kansas.

#### **5.1 Part One: Media Analysis Discussion**

Using elements of fantasy theme analysis and narratology, a media analysis of twenty local, regional, national, and international media artifacts identified differences between the language used and narratives advanced regarding the Excel Industries event. Local and regional media outlets had similar results when compared with each other, as did national and international media outlets. However, when local and regional categories were compared together against combined national and international coverage, differences between the use of language and narratives advanced were drastically different. Local and regional stories focused primarily on the community aftermath and resident reaction following the shooting and featured several articles informing community residents affected by the tragedy of where they could seek free or low-cost resources for mental health, spiritual care, and monetary support.

By contrast, national and international stories focused more on the assailant, Cedric Ford, and delved into his background, criminal history, and possible motives behind the event. National and international artifacts also focused on Kansas' gun legislation and statements by political leaders, as 2016 was a presidential election year. These findings were opposite when compared to the initial literature, which suggested that local media outlets tend to report "the facts only" and are void of figurative language, while national media outlets focus on the storyline and choose figurative and descriptive language when reporting (Pew Research Center, 1998). In this media analysis, local and regional media outlets emphasized an emotional community narrative for Hesston and Harvey County while national and international focused mostly on the "facts" of the event at Excel Industries. Overall, article analysis identified vastly different narratives between local/regional and national/international coverage, even though all media outlets were covering the same event during the same two-week timeframe following the shooting.

## **5.2 Part Two: Qualitative Interview Discussion**

### **5.2.1 Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) Model**

Crisis communication is designed to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes that result from a crisis (Coombs, 1999), and communication in general is an essential component of any community's public health preparedness initiative (Courtney, et. al., 2003). For this research study, the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Model (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005) was used as a foundational template to explain the "response" and "recovery" phases of crisis management within the larger community. The five stages of the CERC model are 1) *pre-crisis*, which emphasizes risk messages,

warnings and preparations; 2) *initial event*, which involves rapid communication of an emergency and/or crisis; 3) *maintenance*, which is concerned with the ongoing facilitation of the situation, including continued uncertainty reduction efforts to enhance decision making; 4) *resolution*, which deals with communicating with the public regarding ongoing clean up, remediation, recovery and re-building efforts; and 5) *evaluation*, which emphasizes lessons learned and new understandings of risk (Ballard-Reisch, et. al., 2008).

Coincidentally, the CERC model was heavily reiterated by multiple interviewees who were not necessarily familiar with this model of crisis management response, but unintentionally affirmed it nonetheless (#1, #3, #4, #7, #8, #10) by explaining processes they witnessed being implemented after the shooting at Excel Industries. These processes, per the statements of the interviewees, fell in line with the various suggested stages of the CERC model. The stages presented in the model were consistent with some of the themes that emerged in the qualitative interviews.

For example, *'recovery' phase emphasis*, which was the first main subtheme for this research study, discussed the importance of not only responding immediately to the crisis itself to contain it, but also the importance of implementing effective recovery efforts to sustain the community long-term (Interviewees #1, #3, #4, #7, #8, #9, #10). This includes setting up long-term funds to provide for those affected, readily available mental health counselors, and other miscellaneous needs such as a meal train or running simple errands for those affected. Stage four of the CERC model, *resolution*, emphasized the need for communication with the public regarding ongoing clean up, remediation, recovery and re-building efforts. Hesston had ample volunteers ready to

provide a warm meal to emergency management responders, investigators, as well as Excel employees and their families. However, according to some interviewees (#1, #2), it was also well communicated by officials, as well as local media outlets, to community residents what specifically was needed. The need was clearly stated, and therefore, it was quickly met.

In another example, *negotiating uncertainty*, which was the first subtheme under the fourth main theme *negative media interactions*, discussed the frustration interviewees felt (#1, #4, #7) with inaccurate reports of the event and navigating that misinformation. Stage three of the CERC model, *maintenance*, which is concerned with the ongoing facilitation of the crisis, includes continued uncertainty reduction efforts to enhance decision making (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Overall, this research would suggest that the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Model (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005) provides both a strong theoretical and practical foundation for handling community crisis and risk communication with an eye toward an audience-centered approach, meaning appropriate community involvement and a need for community-wide evaluation in assessing major and minor needs after a crisis.

### **5.2.2 Community v. Individual Crisis Response**

Addressing a public crisis requires both a community-centered approach (Ballard-Reisch, et. al., 2008) and a separate approach to reach individuals as well (Roberts, 2005). Prior research surrounding crisis and risk communication suggesting these findings was affirmed by interviewees who found significant value in establishing community-wide events soon after the crisis (#1, #3, #7, #8), as well as free or low-cost

resources to individuals who may not be ready to handle the crisis at the same pace as the general community (#7, #8, #10). This confirms earlier literature claiming how imperative it is that crisis workers and community professionals involved in post-crisis efforts have a framework in mind to guide them when responding to a public crisis (Ballard-Reisch, et. al., 2008; Courtney, et. al., 2003; Roberts & Seeger, 2005). The Sunday evening following the shooting, a community-wide vigil was held in the Hesston High School gymnasium, where anyone was invited to come and mourn the tragedy alongside the rest of the community.

While this event was largely praised by interviewees (list numbers), other interviewees (#7, #8, #10) made a point to acknowledge those individuals who might be experiencing crisis in a unique way that is separate from the general community (Schubert, 2003). In this case, the CERC model from Reynolds and Seeger (2005) would be less effective when compared to Roberts' (2005) individually-centered approach. This means that professionals who are involved in the "response" and "recovery" efforts after a crisis must be trained to understand and distinguish acute stress reactions and advise individuals experiencing this stress about the proper resources, whether it be a referral to a mental health service, a church group, or a trauma recovery group (Schubert, 2003).

Using prior academic research examining crisis communication response management and this research study's interviewee responses, it is suggested that crisis response is far from a black-and-white, standardized process. Crisis and risk communication and strategies cannot be generalized to fit all crises. Community standards, the type of crisis (i.e. natural disaster, criminal act, etc.), and the

demographics of those involved are just some of the factors that must be taken into consideration to respond with an effective crisis communication strategy. While Reynolds and Seeger's (2005) stage model complements the majority of Hesston's process in responding to their local crisis, the process in other locations might not be the same. Thoughtful and effective community crisis preparation requires a working balance of understanding the steps within a crisis and risk communication model while allowing flexibility after a true crisis occurs.

### **5.2.3 Media Uncertainty Reduction and Strategy**

In the first part of this research study, a media analysis confirmed that different narratives were portrayed and reported, even though all media outlets involved in the analysis were covering the same event during the same two-week timeframe. False information and inaccurate reporting caused chaos among certain interviewees (#1, #4, #7) in their professional capacity as they tried to determine when the immediate crisis was no longer a threat, which can be the very nature of emerging events in crisis situations. It is important for a crisis management team to anticipate and prepare for mismanaged and/or inaccurate information, particularly within the context of an emergent crisis and immediately following the event. Prior literature reiterates that a strong crisis intervention model should focus on the delineation of accurate information, which is crucial in preventing unnecessary worry and chaos within a community (Reynolds & Seeger, year).

Interviewees (#8, #10) also reiterated the importance of establishing a positive rapport and working relationship with media outlets who are covering the crisis. Prior stated research suggests that, in today's age, the media not only informs those who

read it, but possesses the ability to shape our attitudes and behaviors (Claudia, 2016). Media has a constant and persistent presence in daily life, and its influence runs deep (Fredrickson, Tainen & Hanning, 2014). Therefore, it is important to establish a strong, experienced point of information officer who can provide accurate details within reasonable timeframes. Interviewees (#4, #7, #8, #10) all commended Hesston's decision-making process for designating an experienced and confident point of information officer who handled the media positively and productively. This kind of rapport between officials and the media is not guaranteed, but certainly helpful when facing a crisis.

#### **5.2.4 Claiming and Sustaining Community Narrative**

Per the criteria set by Bormann (1972) and Foss (2009), the “Hesston Strong” campaign would be a clear example of a rhetorical vision “chaining out” among those participating, which would be the Hesston community professionals and community residents. While the campaign initially began with a sole community resident uploading a downloadable flyer to a website, it quickly dispersed amongst the Hesston community, taped to windows on Homes and on the front doors of businesses. The flyer was then used by formal recovery personnel of Harvey County, who printed the flyers in mass quantities and handed them out to those who attended town meetings, press briefings, and community vigils and gatherings.

Per interviewees (#1, #4, #7, #10), if Hesston residents were to see or discuss the community infamous flyer today, they would still be able to explain exactly why it was created, and what it meant for them personally and for the community. The flyer became enough of a symbolic cue for the audience, meaning the community residents

of Hesston, Kansas, to call up the entire rhetorical vision (Foss, 2009). The message was intentional in communicating that Hesston would eventually recover and come together as a community because of the strength within the community (Interviewee #7). The flyer was a reiteration of this call to be strong and recover, even after a tragic crisis.

For other communities who may experience a local crisis, it is important to claim and sustain a community-wide narrative that is short and broad, but also strong enough to be agreed upon as a “shared worldview” while facing a crisis. This allows a community to establish and root their identity in a unified cause. This would be affirmed by stage four of the CERC model, *resolution*, as the public is encouraged by community professionals to focus on specific recovery efforts. This means that community professionals in charge of handling post-crisis response and recovery strategies must take this into consideration when deciding how to express messages to the community with the intention of those messages being repeated or shared virally throughout the community.

### **5.3 Research Study Limitations**

While this research study was performed with intimate detail and consideration with respect to the topic, there were certainly limitations apparent in this research study. Two limiting elements were participant restriction and using a singular case study for data analysis and findings.

#### **5.3.1 Participant Restriction**

While it wasn't difficult to obtain ten willing research participants to be interviewed for the second part of the research project, there were some participants who played

key roles following the Excel Industries shooting who declined to participate. Since the event occurred in 2016, and the statute of limitations for legal recourse is in effect for two years following the date of the initial incident, the perceived risk of potential liability and blame resulted in certain key individuals being unwilling to participate.

Unfortunately, some of these participants could have provided valuable insights for this research project. Nonetheless, the researcher collected meaningful data from the willing participants. Perhaps an extension of this case study could be performed after the statute of limitations expires in 2018. However, asking participants to recall specific details about their involvement more than two years following the crisis could potentially result in false or incomplete data.

Another limitation presented itself in the researcher's inability to obtain approval through the Institutional Review Board to interview employees of Excel Industries, families of the victims, and those directly involved during the crisis event itself (i.e. the police officer who shot and killed assailant Cedric Ford). The researcher suspects the insights of those who were more intimately involved during the crisis itself would have also provided valuable information, as many of them were also involved in the post-crisis response and recovery efforts. Some potential participants even personally requested of the researcher that they be permitted to be part of study. However, as they did not meet the inclusion criteria due to their involvement during the crisis itself, or due to them being an employee of Excel Industries, they were not able to participate.

### **5.3.2 Singular Case Study**

A final limitation present in this study is the mere fact that this is one singular case study, which takes place in a specific geographic location at a unique point in time.

It would not be wise nor ethical of the researcher to make the hasty assumption that generalizations about the way Hesston community professionals, administrators, and citizens would be relevant to other communities experiencing a local crisis. Additional case studies would have to be conducted and compared to determine if there are themes so strong and consistent that they can be applicable in nearly any crisis, but that is highly unlikely. Therefore, the researcher of this study humbly acknowledges that this is only one case study, but suggests that this is a foundation on which additional case studies can be conceptualized with small and/or rural communities who face unexpected local crises.

#### **5.4 Future Implications for Research**

There are many reasonable, tangible and applicable uses for this type of research. Referring to an earlier statistic, millions of people (Roberts, 2005) each year are confronted with crisis-inducing events that they cannot resolve on their own. These people come from all around the world, and experience these crisis-inducing events in a diverse variety of communities and geographic locations. Not enough research has been conducted on small and rural communities to determine whether there are consistencies in how people react to local tragedies. In a town where “everyone knows everyone,” what are the best methods of response and recovery? These questions are worth continuing study. Empowering small and rural communities to respond and recover after a sudden tragedy is worthwhile research, and this initial case study with Hesston suggests, through the professional opinions of community leaders and administrators, that this sort of discussion taking place proactively, before a crisis

occurs, will better empower and equip those communities in both the short and long-term (Ballard-Reisch, et. al., 2008; Courtney, et. al., 2003; Roberts & Seeger, 2005).

#### **5.4.1 Future Case Studies**

Between January 2017 and April 2017, the United States has experienced over seventy mass shootings, where three or more individuals were killed and/or wounded during one event (Gun Violence Archive, 2017). Some of these shootings took place in larger cities such as Philadelphia or Chicago. Others took place in smaller communities such as Rothschild, Wisconsin, population 5,298 (Richmond, 2017), and Manvel, Texas, population 6,599 (Snelgrove, 2017). So long as there is gun violence, there will be future case studies to perform and learn from. This means, unfortunately, that there will also be communities who require healing and response and recovery models to address these types of tragedies.

#### **5.4.2 Small and Rural Community Training**

Finally, looking to the future, specifically in the realm of prevention and preparation, empowering small and rural communities to handle potential crises starts with discussions, tabletop exercises, and community-wide collaborative trainings (Courtney, et. al., 2003). Out of these come role designations, communication clarifications, and a unified process for handling emergency management tasks. With the foundation of this research, the researcher is interested in someday publishing a simple guide or manual that could be outsourced to small and rural communities for training prevention efforts.

## **5.5 Conclusions**

After witnessing the Hesston tragedy as it unfolded just one year ago I wanted to find some sort of redemptive meaning from “lessons learned” that could help other communities like Hesston in the future. Given the town’s community standards and religious foundation, it was important to the community professionals and leaders in Hesston and Harvey County that this kind of senseless violence be immediately condemned, and that the messages of hope and forgiveness be a driving force throughout the community as a recovery effort.

Through the stories and recollections of those community professionals and leaders, a research study has come to fruition that delves into the importance of community recovery and response efforts, and the specific elements that go into that, as well as maintaining positive interactions and overall relationships with the media, whether they are based locally, regionally, nationally or internationally. With the foundation of this research, future case studies examining small and rural communities and their responses to local crises, analysis of their usage and non-usage of the standard response and recovery crisis model to manage these tragedies can better empower and equip other local communities who have not yet faced tragedy to the degree that Hesston, Kansas did.

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## APPENDIXES

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND RECRUITMENT MATERIALS FOR INTERVIEWS

- Question 1: What was the job title and position you held during Excel crisis?
- Question 2: Was any communication crisis or risk training provided for you or your department either before, during, or after the incident at Excel?
- If yes, who performed the training(s)?
  - If yes, was the training relevant specifically to the Excel situation?
- Question 3: Did you interact with any media or news outlets after the incident at Excel?
- If yes, did you initiate the first contact, or did they contact you?
- Question 4: In the beginning analysis of my research for this study, there is evidence to support that there were two existing but contrasting narratives drawn between local and national/international news outlets. The local news narratives focused on the victims, the survivors, the strength of the community, and the religious and cultural background of Hesston. National and international news outlets focused on the Excel shooter and his background and family, gun laws and regulations of Kansas, and painted a “less than positive” image of Hesston and Kansas because of those laws and regulations.
- Did you have any exposure to either of these narratives while you were dealing with the aftermath of the Excel crisis?
  - If yes, how did you deal with the narrative(s)?
- Question 5: In your opinion, how can a community combat a national or international narrative when it is so contrary to a local one?
- Question 6: How do you think small or rural communities can combat unflattering narratives in crisis situations?
- Are there specifically any strategies you would recommend that would require being put in place before a crisis happened to be most effective?
- Question 7: Anything else you would like to add that might be beneficial for me to know for this research?

APPENDIX B  
IRB RECRTUIMENT MATERIALS

**Recruitment Email**

Subject: Invitation to Participate

Hello [FIRST NAME HERE],

My name is Kelsay Gardiepy and I represent Wichita State University as a graduate student in the Elliott School of Communication program. I appreciate your willingness to consider participating in my research study.

This study will examine local and national media news and how their reported narratives might affect small and/or rural communities facing the aftermath of a crisis, such as a criminal act or natural disaster. We are specifically investigating the 2016 Hesston Excel Industries shooting that took place in February 2016. My co-researcher, Dr. Deborah Ballard-Reisch, and I hope to learn which crisis communication resources are most needed and/or useful in aiding small towns and/or rural communities after a crisis. We then plan to compile a list of best practices in crisis response that will be provided to rural communities throughout Kansas as a preparation guide to use in the event of their own community crisis.

You were selected for participation in this study because you are a community professional and/or volunteer who was involved in the post-tragedy crisis recovery network after the Hesston Excel Industries shooting in February 2016.

Before we begin, I would like to share a few procedures for our conversation. If you decide to participate, you will conduct an interview with me, one of the two co-researchers of this study. The interview will include questions about your professional role during the 2016 Hesston Excel Industries shooting in February 2016, what crisis communication resources were needed immediately after, what were provided, and what were most and least helpful. A list of all interview questions will be provided to you via email before your scheduled interview, should you choose to participate. The interview will require one 30-minute to 1-hour session to complete, which will take place either in-person or over the phone. Only one interview session will be required. There is no compensation provided for participating in this study.

With your permission, we would like to record your interview on an audio recorder. The audio recordings of all participant interviews will be kept in a locked, secure file cabinet at Wichita State University. The researchers will securely destroy the audio recordings after it has been transcribed by the researchers, which we anticipate will be within two weeks of its recording.

Although we will be on a first name basis, no names or identifying comments will be used when I report the results of this session. You can be assured of complete confidentiality.

APPENDIX B (continued)

This interview will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes.

*Have you have read and signed the consent form?*

*Do you have any questions about it before we begin?*

*Do I have your permission to audio record our interview?*

Please contact me if you have any questions or need further information. I can be reached by cell phone at (541) 870-1281 or by email at [kegardiepy@shockers.wichita.edu](mailto:kegardiepy@shockers.wichita.edu).

Thank you for your consideration,

Kelsay Gardiepy

Wichita State University, IRB # 3826

APPENDIX C  
CONSENT FORM



**Purpose:** You are invited to participate in a research study discussing local and national media news narratives and how they can affect small and/or rural communities facing the aftermath of a crisis, such as a criminal act or natural disaster. We hope to learn crisis communication resources are most needed and/or useful in aiding small towns and/or rural communities after a crisis and compile a list of best practices in crisis response that will be provided to rural communities throughout Kansas as a preparation guide to use in the event of their own community crisis.

**Participant Selection:** You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a community professional and/or volunteer who was publically involved in the post-tragedy crisis recovery network after the Hesston Excel Industries shooting in February 2016. Approximately 10 participants will be invited to join the study.

**Explanation of Procedures:** If you decide to participate, you will conduct an interview with Kelsay Gardiepy, one of the co-investigators in this research study. The interview will include questions about your professional role during the 2016 Hesston Excel Industries shooting in February 2016, what crisis communication resources were needed immediately after, what were provided, and what were most helpful. Two sample interview questions are listed below. A list of all interview questions will be provided to you via email before your scheduled interview, should you choose to participate. The interview will take about 30-minutes to 1-hour to complete. Only one interview session will be required. With your permission, we would like to record your interview on an audio recorder.

*Sample Question 1:* Did you interact with any media or news outlets after the incident at Excel?

*Sample Question 2:* What recommendations do you have for small and rural communities that would assist them in preparing to respond effectively to a potential crisis situation?

**Discomfort/Risks:** There is a risk that you might deem some of the questions asked about your involvement to be sensitive. You will be given the list of interview questions in advance of your interview via email. During the interview, you will not be required to answer any question(s) that you do not wish to answer.

## APPENDIX C (continued)

**Confidentiality:** Every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, in order to make sure the study is done properly and safely, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. By signing this form, you are giving the research team permission to share information about you with the following groups:

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state regulatory agencies;
- The Wichita State University Institutional Review Board;
- The sponsor or agency supporting the study

The researchers may publish the results of the study. If they do, they will only discuss group results. Your name will not be used in any publication or presentation about the study.

The audio recordings of all participant interviews will be kept in a locked, secure file cabinet at Wichita State University. The researchers will destroy the audio recordings securely after it has been transcribed by the researchers, which they anticipate will be within two weeks of its recording.

**Refusal/Withdrawal:** Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Wichita State University and/or the Elliott School of Communication. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**Contact:** If you have any questions about this research, you can contact either of us at:

Kelsay Gardiepy  
(541) 870-1281  
kegardiepy@shockers.wichita.edu

Dr. Deborah Ballard-Reisch  
1845 Fairmount Street, Wichita KS 67260-0007  
(316) 978-6066  
deborah.ballard-reisch@wichita.edu

If you have any questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount Street, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that:

APPENDIX C (continued)

- You have read (or someone has read to you) the information provided above,
- You are aware that this is a research study,
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to your satisfaction,
- You have voluntarily decided to participate.

You are not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep. In addition to agreeing to participate, your signature below indicates that you consent to having your interview audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Wichita State University, IRB # 3826