NEGOTIATING ONLINE IDENTITIES IN SOCIAL MEDIA: A STUDY OF UNIVERSITY

STUDENTS

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Abstract

Identity and identity construction are constantly changing areas of study, especially as they relate to communication studies. Online communication is an increasingly common mode of communication, and social media is one of the fastest growing forms of online communication. In social media, individuals create pages that seemingly represent themselves. This representation contains both initial and ongoing negotiation of identity.

This study explores how college students, as an active demographic in social media networking, negotiate and manage their online identities. The theory primarily used to study this mode of communication is Computer-mediated Communication theory, which encompasses other theories including social presence theory. In studying college students' negotiation of identity in social media, the methodology of this study is qualitative interviews. These interviews are demonstrative in nature, and conducted with the social media artifact present.

This study finds that overall college students do not see social media as limiting their identities or falsifying the identity information shared online, but rather view social media as a tool for expressing their identities, although some parts of identity are held back in online interactions. This means that, although it is not readily apparent to the creators of social media pages, identities of students are being fragmented to fit into the restricted space of social media.

Signature Page

We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Identity and identity construction are constantly changing areas of study, especially as they relate to communication studies. Communicating identity to others is an important part of developing identity, and there are new ways in which this communication is being done. In studying social media, one of the important aspects of communication is how identity is portrayed and negotiated. Social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter create a space where it is necessary for individuals to negotiate and fragment their identity, in order to function in these online communities. Ellis (2010) researches Facebook and eventually comes to an understanding of "personal and social identity as communicative creation" (p. 41). This means that every communicative interaction on social media sites is an expression of at least one aspect of the creator's identity. This new area of communication may have further implications for identity development, as well as for Communication Studies as a whole. Thus, negotiating identity in social media interaction merits new research and understanding.

Identity negotiation in social media is an area that requires its own study, but it is also necessary to consider in terms of communication theories as a whole. As now forms of communication arise, theory should be updated to remain current with the new modes of communicating. Social media as a new form of communication may prompt some new communication theories to arise. In addition to contemporary communication theories developing from the prevalence of social media, some communication and identity theories were established prior to the advent of social media, so it is important to assess these theories and test their applicability to the advancing communications world of social media.

Importance of the Study

In social media, individuals create pages that seemingly represent themselves. This representation contains both initial and ongoing negotiation of identity. The social media site creator must select what information and images to portray to their friends and the public, and then continue to negotiate their online identity through the communication they participate in. A study that considers this negotiation and how college students, as a prevalent demographic in utilizing social media, go about this negotiation will be helpful in further understanding the use of social media in future communication studies.

Communications theories must stay up to date on new modes of communication, and this is why studying social media is important. How the site creator understand his or her identity in all online interactions is important to understand for the future of communication studies.

Definitions of Terms Used

Identity- Personal and interpersonal understanding of the self. Identity can be defined by a person individually, or in their interactions with other. Each instance of communication shapes the identity of those involved, as Deetz (1990) notices, "Images of the self and other are formed in all interactions" (p. 235). Identity is "composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies" (Stryker and Burke, 2000, p. 284)

Computer-mediated communication- Refers to all communication executed through the use of electronics or computers. This communication includes social media, blogs, email, and instant messaging.

<u>Social Presence Theory</u>- Communication theory in Computer-mediated communication that "suggests that text-based messages deprive computer-mediated communication users of the sense that other warm bodies are jointly involved in the interaction" (Griffin, 2009, p. 138). This theory considers that communication via computers is disconnected from a sense of actual interaction with another person.

<u>Snowball Sampling-</u> Refers to a method of sampling where a few people are approached, and then those subjects refer others who are applicable to the study.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

The remaining chapters focus on reviewing prior research on identity and social media communication, followed by the results of a study of identity negotiation in social media. Chapter two contains a literature review including conceptual and theoretical framework, the necessity of identity negotiation in social media, comparative identity negotiation, and communication theories applicable to identity negotiation. The literature review continues on to discuss how identity is negotiated during the process of online communication. Chapter three outlines the methodology of the study including scope, sampling, procedures of the study, and procedures of analysis. Chapter four then details the findings of the study and continues on to analyze the data found. Chapter five concludes the research, addresses the study limitations, and looks at future research to be done in related fields.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Since the prevalence of computer-mediated communication, there has been much academic writing about this new wave of communication. Researchers are striving to keep up

to date with the changing times, and communication theories must do the same. Some older theories regarding communication in general will be used in this section to help understand the changing world of social media, and research directly related to social media will be applied as well in order to provide a contemporary contrast.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The initial framework for this study will focus on past communications theories of identity, and seek to bring these theories up to date as they apply to social media usage. Identity, in this case, will be studied in terms of how students negotiate multiple identities online. This identity is how they view themselves, void of outside relationships to groups or other people. The online identity will be evaluated in terms of what points the individual chooses to express on their social media sites. In essence, this online identity is a personal expression of who a certain person allows others in an online arena to see. Exploring individual identity will be important, because as the research presented below shows, individual identity can be affected by outside components. Similarly, social identity should be studied because it is this segment of identity that is performed on social media sites. Social identity refers to the collective identity that someone ascribes to when performing their identity in various social settings. The intersection of individual identity and avowed social identity is where online identity is created on social media sites. Identity is formed and negotiated through communication and interaction, so everything that is posed on a social media page or communicated through a social media medium is a part of identity and is perpetuated through communication.

Necessity of Identity Negotiation

Identity in social media must be negotiated. In their study of social networking, Pelling and White (2009) found that "self-identity had a direct effect on high-level social networking website use behavior, suggesting that the more social networking website use is a salient part of a young adult's identity, the greater the individual's use of these websites" (p. 758). These findings show that the use of social networking sites influences the identity of those who use them, and that the influence is cyclical, with greater personal identification producing greater use of the sites. With the increase in use of social networking sites, each individual is forced to select what identity they will share in an online arena.

Ellis (2010) researches Facebook and eventually comes to an understanding of "personal and social identity as communicative creation" (p. 41). Investigating this creation, many other studies look at how identity is affected by other's views and input, where before this identity creation was less collaborative. Ellis (2010) notices that people using social media sites select their profile picture with "knowledge of how others in the network will respond, even if this is only on an unconscious level" (p. 39). This is an indicator of how identity is affected by social interaction. If a picture is being chosen for the responses it will elicit, the identity of the person being represented is already in negotiations, because there is consideration about how to represent themselves. The photo itself is an expression of the site creator, but the sharing of the photo and the responses to the photo make the personal choice of a photo into a social identity. In the same way, Bandura (1982) notices how people's actions are often influenced by what others think and how they view the action. Bandura (1982) says that "people often do not behave optimally, even though they know full well what to do. This is because self-referent thought also mediates the relationship between knowledge and action" (p. 122). In Bandura's

view, people think about how they will be viewed before they complete an action. When this is the case in social media, identity can be influenced or changed by the fear or simply knowledge of what others will think. Bandura's writing was before the use of social media sites was rampant, but the same idea of identity becoming socialized is amplified through the use of social networking sites.

Identity Negotiation as Comparative

Identity is also negotiated by success or failure of people similar to the person. Bandura (1982) calls this influence "vicarious experience" (p. 126). In this idea of vicarious experience, "seeing similar others perform successfully can raise efficacy expectations in observers who then judge that they too possess the capabilities to master comparable activities" (Benadura, 1982, pp. 126-127). In the case of social media, these successes and failures become much more visible. Other people can instantly see whether a person is successful or unsuccessful by stories, photos, or other representations on their social media page. This again brings identity into the social realm. Ellison, Lampe, and Steinfield (2007) explain that this noticing of others further requires negotiations of identity. Their study of Facebook revealed that "there is a positive relationship between certain kinds of Facebook use and the maintenance and creation of social capital" (p. 1161). This can be understood because on social media websites others can see how many friends you have, how often you are online, what your photos look like, and a variety of other information which makes you more or less visible. Ellison et al. (2007) further explain that "internet use alone did not predict social capital accumulation, but intensive use of Facebook did" (p. 1164). When looked at in relation to others, a person can view how socially

successful or unsuccessful they are on social media sites, which is a gauge that is unique to this type of communication.

Kevada (2009) performs a case study of a company and its interactions online on social media sites. The study is based on an organization, but the same principles can be applied to a study of individuals. The company being studied in this case study has multiple pages on multiple social media sites. Kevada(2009) explains that this can "fragment the membership base of the organization and complicate the process of communicating with its participants" (p. 4). This can be related to identities of individuals, because it is similar to the different identities of people in their different involvements in groups. Each group has its own version of the individual, which may complicate how the individual can communicate and negotiate an overall identity. Kevada (2009) also learns that "reciprocity and interactivity are important both for bonding and for the development of a collective identity" in the realm of social media (p. 6). This means that it is important for the social media user, whether a company or an individual, to be active on the social media sites. They must post on others walls on Facebook, and be sure that they have followers on Twitter, because these are the standards by which their identity is judged. Kevada (2009) quotes Livingstone (2008) in saying that "position in the peer network was more significant than the personal information provided" (p. 5). In the case of creating an online identity, the expression of that identity and success of conveying personality would be the most important part of the interaction. However, in social media, the quantity of friends and followers may become more important than the actual identity created, because the goal is gaining social capital.

Communication Identity Theories in Social Media

Identity theory crosses disciplines to include sociology, psychology, and communications. The intersection of all of these disciplines means that there is a significant need to study identity theory as it relates to forms of communication such as social media websites. Stryker and Burke (2000) explain that identity theory must include a look at "how social structures affect the self and how self affects social behaviors" (p. 285). This interaction is exactly why identity development and identity theory are important in the study of social media. Current social structures include these online platforms, and therefore the use of social media websites will have an effect on the creation of the self. In order to understand Stryker and Burke's point about social structures and the self, the structure itself must be studied. In this case, the structure is the online platform and the identity is the created online identity.

Deetz (1990) writes that "Images of the self and other are formed in all interactions" (p. 235). This means that not only are interactions important in exhibiting identity, but also in the direct creation of social identity. Taking into consideration the creation of online identity in social media networking, especially in the demographic of college students, it is clear that this is a popular form of communicating. In each interaction and posting on social media sites, "images of the self" are being formed when communicating with others (p. 235).

Each description that a person types on a social media page helps to create and negotiate the identity that they exhibit. Bandura (1982) explains that "component cognitive, social, and behavioral skills must be organized into integrated courses of action to serve innumerable purposes" (p. 122). While Bandura was writing about human agency at a time before the prevalence of social media sites, the idea of organizing what identity points to display and what actions to take can be applied to social media because it effects how online

identity is created. Identity development is the process of creating a self through interaction with others as well as learned and personal traits. Stryker and Burke (2000) explain the connection of personal and social identity by saying that "parts of a self [are] composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies" (p. 284). In a society of social media, this means that meanings and roles of people are exhibited online, and that the actions online create an identity for the person who is portraying the online roles.

Messages are exchanged, and meaning is transferred in online communication, but the communication theory of Social Information Processing shows that people in online environments are not always aware of the reality of their interactions. This theory includes the idea of social presence theory which "suggests that text-based messages deprive computer-mediated communication users of the sense that other warm bodies are jointly involved in the interaction" (Griffin, 2009, p. 138). Therefore, people who use social media websites may not be acutely aware that their interactions do indeed shape their identities. This contribution to the person's online identity may not be as easy to see as it is in face-to-face interaction where nonverbal cues are used, but instead "users adapt remaining communicative cues such as language and textual displays to the process of relational management" (Hancock, et al, 2009, p. 77). In this way, the communication is adjusted in order to be understood, and is a contribution to the person's identity, although they may or may not realize it.

Most identity theories are theories developed before the widespread use of social media communication. Therefore, it is important to understand that these theories may have limitations in their application and use in relation to social media sites. Walther (2009) notices

that "Boundaries are being foisted upon us by technological developments that may limit (or maybe revise) the scope of our extant theoretical frameworks" (p. 748). However, if online communication is understood as similar to and interchangeable with offline communication, these theories are still applicable to the study of social media sites. Walther (2009) continues to say that "computer-mediated communication itself is diversifying and normalizing" (p. 751). Therefore, studies of this type of communication must "diversify, not pluralize or monopolize" (Walther, 2009, p. 750).

Walther's explanation of the change in identity studies due to the introduction of online communication is crucial to studies of social media sites in relation to communications theories. Older identity theories are generally focused inward, on the creation of identity as something personal and separate from the outside world. In dealing with social media, social identity construction can be visibly monitored by others online, and can influence personal identity construction. This means that personal identity construction is now intertwined with social identity construction, which could potentially open up an entirely new field of study. While some tenets of older identity theories may still apply and be useful, there should also be vigilance in looking for new theories which may arise and further develop the field.

Negotiating Identity during Online Communication

In creating an online identity, the social media site creator must be constantly aware of all that is happening on the site. This awareness must apply to personal identity, social identity, group membership and interactions, information selection, and the roles an individual plays in each aspect. The social media site creator must be aware that if one point of negotiation changes, the entirety of the online identity can change.

Ellis (2010) explains her distinction between two types of identities by saying that "the idea that each person is unique is a tenet of personal identity, while 'social identity' refers to our roles and responsibilities" (p. 37). However, while we may try to differentiate between personal and social identity, social media sites blur the lines. People participating on these sites are thrust into a world where they must infuse their identities and explain this amalgamation to the other people in the online communities. People using social media sites feel compelled to project a certain image in their communication online. Ellis (2010) says that "my personal identity is selected from a choice of social identities" (p. 39). This means that there are socially accepted personalities that people are comfortable with online, and that people on social networking sites feel influenced to select one of those personalities to exemplify rather than just being themselves. This may seem disingenuous, but social influence is a component of online identity that everyone must negotiate for themselves. When attempting to navigate social media platforms, it may be the case that identities are limited because of fear or outside influence.

Wang, Walther, and Hancock (2009) discuss how people act and interact in online settings and explain that "identification and group membership are the driving forces of online attraction" (p. 60). This idea that group membership is salient to online identity is one that is echoed across studies of online identity. Ellis (2010) says that "we select our social identity from the series of group memberships available" (p. 38). By selecting to join groups such as the groups and pages on Facebook, the social media member decides what image to portray to others through membership in the group. People are drawn to a group and other people who agree with them and share their beliefs. Particularly in online situations, people can be drawn

to a group when they receive positive reinforcement from other group members. This can then have an impact on identity negotiation, because the individual begins to define him or herself as a member of the group. Wang et al. (2009) explain that "intergroup membership interacted with the interpersonal demeanor and produced a joint effect on both the identification with the in-group and the identification with the out-group" (p. 78). This is to say that understanding and functioning within group dynamics can lead to an internalization of those dynamics, thus personalizing every action a group member makes, both in the group and in interactions outside of the group. This internalization can encourage an individual in the creation of their online identity.

Stryker and Burke (2000) discuss the idea of group membership as defining various identities for the member involved. They assert that "persons have as many identities as distinct networks of relationships in which they occupy positions and play roles" (p. 286). This idea breaks up identity into fragments, each of which is relevant to the specific group in which the person is a member. This may become a problem if the groups or group identity is in conflict with another identity that the person claims. Stryker and Burke (2000) note that this becomes difficult for the person by explaining that "the greater the number of related identities, the greater the difficulty of dealing simultaneously with relationships among them" (p. 292). To deal with this, fragmented social identity requires an ongoing process of negotiation which the person must understand and manage. In an online setting, this is even more noticeable because the fragmented identity variables are represented all together on the same social media page.

Stutzman (2006) explains that there is a risk in putting personal information on the internet and that many social media sites request this personal information when he says that "Facebook… requested the disclosure of identity information beyond common elements" (p. 3). He continues to say that there may be "a disconnect between the value of traditional identity information and the new types of identity information being disclosed" (2006, p. 7). Stutzman's main point in saying this is that there is a danger of identity theft or other crimes when personal information is shared online, but there may also be an identity threat as well. The disclosure of this personal information becomes part of an online identity that must be negotiated along with the other varying aspects. The decision of what to include in online identity and what not to include is another aspect of identity negotiation.

The use of social media necessitates a negotiation and creation of online identity. The way in which students go about this negotiation is important to study and attempt to understand. Stryker and Burke (2000) point out that becoming attached to a network will have an effect on a person's identity. When a person is committed to a network, their identity becomes intertwined with the group identity. Defining this connection, Stryker and Burke (2007) explain that "commitment refers to the degree to which persons' relationships to others in their networks depend on possessing a particular identity and role; commitment is measurable by the costs of losing meaningful relations to others, should the identity be forgone" (p. 286). This means that people are more committed to organizations or networks with which they identify and have a personal stake in. When accessing social media sites many times daily, they become a salient part of the person's life. Studies of the connection between social media and exhibited identity are important because they will help to understand how

people negotiate various aspects of online communication, and develop and exhibit identity accordingly.

Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the how college students express and make sense of identities in social media usage. In light of a new communication mode such as social media, the study will evaluate existing communications theories and understand their applicability to social media. The research objectives of this study include:

RQ1: How do college students make sense of identity in social media?

RO2: How does online identity emerge in the use of Facebook and Twitter?

RQ3: How does avowed online identity compare to offline identity?

Chapter III: Methodology

Scope

The scope of this study is to understand how college students negotiate their avowed identities when creating social media pages. This study will consider the multiple identities that college students portray on social media sites. As Pelling and White (2009) noted, when the use of social networking sites becomes part of a person's identity, they are more likely to use the sites more often (p. 758). The social media sites become a medium for students to express a variety of identities, which they then need to manage and understand. Social identity is also an important component to study, because, as Wang, Walther, and Hancock (2009) explain, "identification and group membership are the driving forces of online attraction" (p. 60). Social identity is created through interaction with others, and in social networking the interactions are online.

Through qualitative interviews with site creators, this study considers how people make sense of identity and manage multiple identities online. The scope of this study was focused on the social media pages as demonstrative in the interview, and sought to understand how the content of the social media artifact portrayed the identities of the page creator. Noting themes that emerged and styles of communication that are perpetuated on social media sites, this study considered how social media effects the creation of online identity in those who use it consistently.

Sampling

The sample used for this study was a snowball sample of college students who use social networking sites. Many social media studies focus on the college demographic,

because of the high volume of users in this demographic. Stutzman (2006) explains that the "inherent sociality of these communities has lead to strong adoption trends, particularly among the college demographic" (p. 1). Ellison, Lampe, and Steinfield (2007) agree with Stutzman when they note that "in a short period of time, facebook has garnered a very strong percentage of users on college campuses" (p. 1153). Studying this group of social media users allowed for a broad sample of a population which is entrenched in social media and whose identity is formed through the use of social media. College students who are active on social media sites were asked if they were willing to participate in a research study to understand how social media site usage relates to their online identities. The students were then asked to refer other students with whom they communicate with online. The students were approached via email messaging, and face-to-face meeting times were scheduled. The original students were selected based on their active use of social media sites. In the qualitative interviews, the artifact of the social media page was present, so that the creator can use it as example. Looking at the social media page with the creator of the page present allowed the researcher to better understand the page creator's identity construction and understanding of negotiation.

Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature. Drawing recurring themes from the interviews and social media pages as artifacts allowed an understanding of the subjects in terms of social media experiences and various identities. This type of study created rich description and emerging research avenues as a result.

The methods of this study were triangulated. The methodology included interviews with the creators of the pages, viewing of the social media page during the interview, and member checks with the students studied to ensure trustworthiness.

Procedures

Informed by the literature of communication identity theories and prior social media studies, flexible interview guides were formulated (See Appendix). Personal interviews with the creators of the pages were then conducted to better understand the content of the pages and how the content of the pages relate to the identity of the creators of the pages. These interviews were loosely scripted, to allow for flexibility in conversation. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with the individual students, and included a computer with their social media page displayed. This allowed for the interviewees to point out examples on their page and explain their interview answers in more detail. Allowing the interviews to flow as the creator of the social page directed allowed for more spontaneous and organic responses.

The process of research informing interview questions was an informative way to understand the creators of social media pages and how they view their social media identities. This methodology also allowed for descriptive explanations to be given by the study participants because they were directly involved in the creation of the artifact being studied, and were able to point out how their identities were negotiated and constructed.

In order to maintain confidentiality, the responses of the students were coded. There were ten social media pages studied, so codes *R1-R10* were assigned to each student. *R* was the designation for respondent, followed by the randomly assigned number of the social media page they were describing. Included in this type of coding was a confidentiality agreement in

which each student was asked to agree to participate in the study. In order to ensure that the responses were valid, each interview concluded with a member check asking the respondent if what was understood by the researcher was in fact the way in which they intended to respond. Coding in this way and member checks helped to ensure that answers to the questions were kept confidential, and that only the researcher knew who responded in which way.

Analysis Process of Interviews

Recurring terms and themes that emerged were then considered, and presented to the interviewees for discussion. The individual interviewee was then able to comment on their own online identity in light of the terms and themes identified. Interviews were then evaluated based on the responses that the students gave about their social media usage. Stryker and Burke (2000) discuss aspects of an identity by explaining that "parts of a self [are] composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies" (p.284). The meanings that the students attach to their social media roles were evaluated as aspects of identities portrayed online.

The analysis of the interviews allowed the study to be inductive, with the topics of study stemming from the interviews with the students. Creators of the social media pages were encouraged to explain their own understanding of social media and how it affects their identities. Throughout the interview process, themes and codes emerged surrounding social media usage. Understanding the themes which appeared in the study allowed the researcher to better apply the developing field of social media to communications theories in the overall analysis of the qualitative study.

Ethics

Deetz (1990) writes about the importance of ethical communication and says that "Images of the self and other are formed in all interactions" (p. 235). This is an important factor to note when determining methodology for this study. Social media has become prevalent in the field of communications, so the interactions formed on social media sites will be forming these "images of the self" that Deetz (1990) discusses. The ethical considerations for this study must include a dedication to confidentiality, because social media pages are generally public. Focusing on confidentiality ensured that someone reading the study will not know who the participants were. In studying the artifacts of social media, the researcher was able to get a better overall picture of the "self" presented in the social media interactions. This understanding that the researcher reached was then checked by the participants in member checks to ensure that the outcome understood by the researcher was the same as what the interviewee intended.

Chapter IV: Analysis and Discussion

This study looked at multiple social media sites created and maintained by college students. These sites included Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. The students interviewed explained their social media pages, and their responses were coded (R1-R10). Responses are quoted and paraphrased in the analysis of the study. These interviews included having the page open for reference and so that the creator could demonstrate how they utilize the media page.

Across styles of social media, some common occurrences were observed. Content in the pages shared commonalities that included song lyrics, quotations, personal information sharing, and photographs. In addition to these content commonalities, common themes emerged in the interviews with the site creators. Themes that emerged through these interviews were connecting with people far away geographically, creating a space to be heard and understood, and the expected nature of having a social media page. While these topics were used in varying instances and for various reasons, their presence in each social media style was prevalent.

Content Commonalities

Personal Information

In previewing the social media pages, personal information could be viewed on the sites about the creators. Facebook "profiles" often showed the creator's employment information, education information, as well as likes and dislikes in terms of hobbies, music, and movies. Facebook page creators view sections when setting up their profiles and are encouraged to select movies, television shows, books, music, and sports that they are interested in. This

information is then linked to other profiles of people who have selected the same interests, and

the creators of the pages receive suggestions to "add as a friend" those with similar interests.

This personal information is requested by Facebook when setting up a profile, but is not

required for the member to fill out in order to join. However, despite the voluntary nature of

disclosing this personal information, many users did in fact volunteer the information. In

interviewing those who were active on Twitter, there were fewer questions in the creation of

the account compared to Facebook, and much less personal information was revealed.

In questioning the students about sharing voluntary personal information, the responses

varied. Some students felt safe and free about sharing information, saying that "Only my

friends can see my profile, so it's ok to have personal information on it" (R4). Others were

more wary, choosing not to share personal information and saying that "You don't know what

people could use the information for" (R3). Overall, most students did share some personal

information, but the information shared ranged from contact information to selecting a movie

or music style to "like," depending on the student's sense of security and overall use for the

site. There was some discussion about concern in listing work information. One student said

that she always lists her work information (R9), while another expressed concern about sharing

employment information saying that "I'm going to delete a lot of it when I start my business"

(R10).

Photos

Users of Facebook were likely to post or be "tagged" in photos. Profile creators are able

to post photos and mark who the people are in the photo. Once selected, the photo will show

up on not only the profile of the person who posted it, but also on the profile of any person

who was "tagged." In addition to being large in the sheer number of photos, the photo option on Facebook was universally utilized by the students interviewed in the study. Every student interviewed had photos of themselves on their Facebook page, whether the origin of the photo was their own posting or someone else tagging them in a photo.

Twitter also contained photos, but did so in a more conversational way. For example, Twitter posts were short thoughts (restricted to 140 characters) to which others could respond. These could include a photo, but there was not as much space for posting as on Facebook. Twitter content was mainly made up of action explanations, such as what the creator had done the day before or what they were planning on doing in the near future.

The students were asked about their own use of photos on social media sites. Nearly all of the students said that they post their own photos on their social media sites, with only one answering that they do not. Responses regarding photos included, "I take a lot of photos and people are always asking me to post them on Facebook so that they can see them too" (R1). "I don't post photos because employers might be looking at Facebook, and I don't want them to see anything that might make me look bad" (R3). "It takes too much time to tag all the people in the photos, but if I was the only one taking photos at an event, I will post them so the other people can see them" (R6). Yes, I post pictures like after a trip or the holidays, not for everyday events (R10).

The students who posted photos on their social media sites seemed to agree that the general reason for posting photos was to show others online what they are doing. Students also noted that they spend time on social media sites looking at other people's photos, and commenting on them when they like the photo. One respondent said, "I like to see my friend's

pictures because it helps keep up with what is going on in their lives. One of my friends has a baby and its fun to see the baby pictures" (R3). Another respondent said, "I post pictures and look at other people's pictures. I will look at pictures from people from high school, but I only comment on pictures from people who I talk to on a regular basis" (R9).

Overall, the respondents seemed to agree that photos are a part of the keeping in touch and communicating that is the basis for their utilization of social media sites. Nearly all students interviewed discussed the importance of staying in touch with people who live far away, but one respondent said that "I rarely use facebook to keep in touch with people far away. I mostly talk to and comment on people's pages who I talk to and see every day" (R9).

Communicating with Social Media

Twitter and Facebook were similar in one aspect of updating the page. While nearly the entirety of Twitter was an update on what the creator was doing or had done, Facebook had a section for the creator to post similar information. This section was called the "status update" by Facebook users. Facebook asks the creator of the page, "What's on your mind?" and the creator fills in the indicated box with whatever they would like. One page touted "Feeling beachy... Wish I could drive to laguna right now," while another said, "Happy Birthday to the best mom ever" (R1, R6). While this update was usually similar to the Twitter standard of what the user was doing or had recently done, Facebook updates also sometimes branched into the arena of quotes or song lyrics. One status update read "There ain't no easy way out...Gonna stand my ground, and I won't back down" (R5), which is a lyric from Tom Petty's song, *Won't Back Down*. The use of song lyrics and quotes are also used on Twitter, but more as a teaser to encourage the reader to go to a link that is also included in the update.

Status updating was another interview topic, and one that could branch into the realm of Twitter as well as Facebook. Students were asked about the frequency of their updating, as well as the content. Responses included, "I update my status at least once a day so that people know what I'm doing" (R3). "My status updates are pretty constant. I could post 3-4 times a day because it's so easy to do on my phone" (R1). "I only change my status about once a week. I use Twitter mostly for following other people" (R2). One respondent said "I only update posts about every 2-3 weeks… I look at Facebook about 4 times a day, but do not write original comments very often" (R9). There were varying degrees of status updating among the students. However, most students did agree that they were more likely to change their status using their phone, because it seemed to be a simpler process than using a computer.

The use of the different forms of social media was varied. For instance, every college student in the sample had a Facebook page (even though some were less active than others), but not every student had created a Twitter account. One respondent who had both social media sites said that "I have made a Twitter account to use for work and networking, but I didn't find it useful so I don't use it anymore" (R1). Other students disagreed, saying instead that "I use Twitter far more than my Facebook. Twitter is quicker and you can learn more important information on it, such as news stories" (R3). One respondent had both social media outlets, but her Twitter account was secret. I use my twitter as an outlet for venting, more for myself, I would write similar things in a journal, but I do it online instead" (R10). She said that if anyone were to begin following her, she would get rid of her Twitter account.

Perceived Naturalization of Social Media

The interviews generally began with questions asking the social media page creators why they chose to create a page in the first place. Answers included, "I was in college, and everyone in college has a Facebook" (R5). "It [joining Facebook] was the cool thing to do" (R1). "Twitter helps me get the news and what's going on in different parts of the world" (R3). "To keep in touch with people who live out of the area" (R6). The respondents generally were surprised by the question about the origin of their social media sites, and many of them had to take a minute to think about their answer. Many respondents seemed to think that social media was a given in their social experience, and an expected part of their identity. For example, one response was, "Well, everyone I know has Facebook, and we use it to know what's going on in each other's lives. It's easier than calling, and you can keep up with more people" (R1).

Concluding Remarks

In wrapping up the interviews, the students were asked to share anything else they would like to say about their social media sites or the communication on the sites. One respondent said, "I think social media is the best way of communicating with people who live in different areas of the country. It is fast, and you can talk to them everyday" (R6). Another student said that "The reason people post status updates or anything is to start a conversation. Otherwise why would you write anything? It's all about communicating and hearing what other people think" (R1). This seemed to be the general consensus among the social media site users. All of the students present agreed that communication was the main goal of their use of social media, regardless of the particular medium they used.

Discussion

In beginning analysis of the interviews of college students who use social media sites, the most prominent theme is that of the near universality of social media among college students. In the interviews, there was an expectation that "everyone" is the creator of their own social media page. This expectation is an indication that Walther (2009) is correct in his assertion that online communication is changing the field of identity study (p.284). Identities are no longer only exhibited in person and in face-to-face communication. Rather, communication and some negotiation of identity online is expected by those who use social media sites, and based on the responses in the study, those with whom they associate.

Stryker and Burke (2000) determined that identity is made up of "parts of a self [are] composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies" (p. 284). In relation to this idea of social media as universal, the study participants indicated that they were willing to ascribe significant meaning to their online identity. The surprise at the question of "why did you decide to join social media online?" shows that the students believe that the social media page that they created is an extension of their identity. The fact that the students in the study were nearly blind to the idea of social media as separate from themselves show that they attach significant meaning to their role as social media creators and participants. However, one study participant cautioned against this attachment, saying that "I find it necessary to draw a line between reality and online. I try to consider what is healthy and think about what I say and how I say things. It seems to be easier to be emotional and transparent online, and this can be dangerous" (R10).

In the discussions of status updating and photo use on social media, most of the students indicated that the goals in using these mediums were to keep in touch with others. This continues along with Hancock, et al's (2009) idea that "users adapt remaining communicative cues such as language and textual displays to the process of relational management" (p. 77). This is especially important in dealing in the social media realm, because there is the limitation of no face-to-face contact, and little to no voice contact with others. However, the students in the study constantly referred to their goal of using social media sites as a means of keeping in touch with others. Therefore, Hancock et al's (2009) idea of using different cues in order to communicate meaning is paramount to use of social media sites. This computer-mediated communication and identity theory is a key to phenomenologically understanding student's identity negotiation on social media sites.

One theory that seemed to be refuted in the study was the idea that "text-based messages deprive computer-mediated communication users of the sense that other warm bodies are jointly involved in the interaction" (Griffin, 2009, p. 138). Rather, the students studied seemed acutely aware that their actions and interactions were being reciprocated by others. This may have been due to the fact that most of the student's interactions on social media sites were with people whom they knew from offline, but whatever the reason, the students explained that the posted or updated the sites in an effort to start real conversation. The response, "The reason people post status updates or anything is to start a conversation. Otherwise why would you write anything? It's all about communicating and hearing what other people think" (R1) was telling because it explained the reasoning for posting on social media sites, as well as the expectation for what the outcome should (in their estimation) be. If the

students were communicating in a way congruent with the idea of computer-mediated communication being cold and disconnected, they would not have utilized it to keep up relationships that they deemed important. However, one respondent noted the difference in computer-mediated communication, saying that each person has to have an understanding of their use of CMC, determine what they use it for, and how that applies to their identity offline (R10).

Stutzman (2006) discussed the sharing of personal identity information online. He notes that there is a difference in how people share information on social media sites as opposed to other online communication (p.2). This can be seen in the study when the students are asked about their use of social media sites in relation to sharing personal information. Students varied in the degree to which they shared personal information on their social media sites, but all of the students studied did share some kind of personal information. However, what they determined to be personal identity information varied depending on the student. Some thought that this personal identity information meant contact information such as email and phone numbers, while others thought it meant information regarding movies or music that the liked. Depending on the student's definition of personal identity information, there were different degrees of willingness to share.

The flexibility of the definition of personal identity information shows that Stutzman's consideration of online social media identity sharing is correct. For those who use it, identity has become so entwined with social media that it is difficult to tell what aspects are disclosures of personal identity and what admissions are expected as a user of social media. The students in this study indicated that social media is an extension of their identity which could lead to an

understanding that nothing shared online is too personal, because it is an expression of their personal self in a venue of personal expression. There are some limitations to this full disclosure, however. When asked about sharing relationship information, one student said "I don't post relationship information. I think that it's too personal to post on Facebook, and I don't want to have to change it if I break up with someone. I don't want everyone to know the changes in my relationship status" (R8). This shows a disconnect between her online identity and her offline identity which is a sentiment not shared by all of the interviewees.

Chapter V: Limitations, Further Research, and Conclusions

Limitations

Limitations of this study could possibly include the demographics of the interview pool and sampling style, and the reasons for the students' usage of social media. Another limitation may have been the interviewing method, which is somewhat different than typical qualitative interviews.

This study primarily interviewed college students at Gonzaga University. This pool of participants may have altered the findings due to the demographic of a small, private, Catholic University. The study also may have been limited by the relatively close geographic hometowns of the students interviewed (All were from within the Western United States). All of the students interviewed were current Gonzaga students who had been attending the University for at least two years. Future studies may vary if the participant pool is in a different location or conducted across a variety of University campuses.

All of the students in this study use social media for communication. Each of the students maintained a Facebook page, and some of them maintained a Twitter account. This could possibly be a limitation because not all of the students interviewed were familiar with both forms of social media in question. Future studies could vary if the students interviewed were frequent users of both modes of social media, or if different social media forms were studied.

One final note about this study is that the method of interviewing was atypical for a qualitative study. Rather than have a strict set of interview questions, the interviews were loosely scripted to allow the conversational directives to come from the students themselves.

Also, the interviews were conducted in front of a computer with the student's social media page available for reference. This is a different way of interviewing, and may have changed the results because the student could explain his or her answers by pointing out aspects of the page. The researcher was also able to view the pages, and may have been influenced by factors other than the responses of the students because of the outside information given by the social media page itself.

Further Research

Although this study focused on identity as presented in online arenas, it would be important in further research to look at what that identity means for the person as a whole, including identity outside of internet exhibition. In studying identity online and offline, a study of identity such as this one could include an assessment of communication theories, and their application in the field of social media. The study could consider the points of alignment with communication theories of the past, as well as how older theories may not be applicable to identity in a social media arena. With communication online becoming more and more prevalent, it is important to study how the online identity fits in with the other points of individual identity. It is important to see if the limitations set by social networking websites lead to a more limited overall identity, or what the implications of the online limitations may be on individual identity. Communications theories including identity theories and theories of computer-mediated communication shed light on this changing area of study. Studying social media and its relationship to identity formation and exhibition will help the field of communication studies understand how identity is affected by social media and what these effects mean for the people who use social media. This study will provide a basis for further

studies which seek to address identity in a world of computer-mediated communication. As this form of communication is becoming increasingly more prevalent and important, studies directed towards an understanding of social identity online will become important in the communications field.

An idea that was not directly addressed in this study was the personal and social identity idea that Hancock et al (2009) explain. This is the idea that if "social identity is more salient than personal identity, people see themselves more as part of a group than as individuals" (p. 61). While this makes sense in a study of a club or group offline, it is difficult to see how it applies to social media in this study. The students in this study felt that their social media pages were an extension and expression of their own identity, so they were only enacting their personal identity. In this way, there was no feeling of being associated with a group. Rather, there was only a feeling of being a person who utilized online social media to express their personal identity. In further research on this topic, a study including students who do not use social media sites could look further into this idea of identification with a group, and determine whether students who use social media identify with a group or as an individual in a more meaningful way.

Similarly, in Stryker and Burke's (2000) discussion of identity theory, they assert that an identity theory must look at "how social structures affect the self and how self affects social behaviors" (p. 285). In order to apply this idea to online social media, it must be determined if social media usage is itself a social structure which has effects on those who use it, or if the identity of those who use social media creates the behaviors exhibited online. If this distinction

could be made, it may open an opportunity for further identity theory research in the field of online social media.

Conclusions

For college students observed in this study, social media networking is their premier form of communication online. This communication allows them to interact and stay in touch with many people. The issue that students struggle with is negotiating their identity offline with what they exhibit online. Through the mediums of Facebook and Twitter, students are able to explain and exhibit aspects of their identity, and even to update the online expression of that identity as it may change over the course of time. Including photos, minute-to-minute updates of feelings, news stories, hobbies, interests, and contact information, social media sites provide a medium for student's identities to be shared and understood. Identity theories in communication research shed light into this relatively new style of computer-mediated communication. However, communication theories remain incomplete when social media communication is ignored in terms of identity. As the research shows, identity is exhibited and negotiated in every online interaction, and communication studies can not ignore the effect that social media has on identity.

Overall, college students do not see social media as limiting their identities or falsifying the identity information shared online, but rather view social media as a tool for expressing their identities, although some parts of identity are held back in online interactions. This distinction suggests that social media is allowing for a broadening of communication, because online community has fewer geographical limitations than personality confined to face-to-face

contact. However, entire identities are not expressed on social media sites, which may lead to

a disconnect between offline identity and identity expressed online.

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Appendix: Flexible Interview Guide

Points of Discussion:

1. Intent in creating social media page

2. Choice of social media medium

3. Usage of Social Media
   Personal Information
   Photos
   Communication
         With whom
         For what reason

4. Implications of social media on identity
   How identity aspects are chosen
   How identity is understood
   What communication tactics are employed

5. Determining intent in communication
   Word choice
   Topics of discussion

6. Frequency of use
   Modes of use
   Phone usage
   Computer usage

7. Additional Comments