The rise of social networking is more prevalent in today’s society than ever before. Of the existing social networking platforms, Twitter is widely recognized as operating within the social networking elite. With this rise in social networking comes the challenge to develop new strategies of navigation when presenting one’s identity online. Through the use of interview and observational data, this study utilizes Michael L. Hecht’s Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) to explore how Twitter users develop and portray their online identity. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted from individuals who had public Twitter accounts that they actively used. Through these interviews four themes were found to represent the strategies presented by participants when developing and portraying their online identity on Twitter. This data also demonstrated that all four frames of the location of identity (personal, enactment, relationship, and communal) were present in Twitter users descriptions of their experiences on Twitter.
I Tweet therefore I am: An Interview Study of Identity Development and Portrayal of Twitter Users Utilizing the Communication Theory of Identity

by
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Ashley A. Carron, Author
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the ways that individuals develop and portray their online identity on Twitter. Since its conception in October of 2006, Twitter has continued to grow into one of the most popular social networking websites in history. While compared to other social networking websites, such as Facebook and MySpace, Twitter is seen by many as having a late start in the social networking world. However, Twitter’s exponential growth of 750% within one year puts it in the social networking elite (Morris, 2010, p. 16). It is this quick growth, as well as the simple, yet effective design of Twitter that sets it apart from its elite counterparts.

With the continuing rise in the popularity of Twitter comes the challenge for users to develop new strategies of navigation when presenting their identities online. There is a distinct difference between online identity and offline identity development and presentation (Donath, 1999). When performing identity online, “many of the basic cues about personality and social role we are accustomed to in the physical world are absent” (Donath, 1999, p. 29). Because of this, “[the way that] individuals construct and maintain their personal identities online [...] is a problem of growing and pressing importance, affecting millions of people everywhere” (Floridi, 2011, p. 477). This study investigates this aspect of growing and pressing importance, by utilizing the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) to frame an exploration of how Twitter users articulate aspects of their identity through their Twitter accounts.
The unique design of Twitter also creates a differentiation between online identity development on Twitter and online identity development on other social networking websites. Twitter users are given a 140-character allowance for the tweets that they present to their audience. This limited text space creates a unique challenge for users when presenting their identity. Keeping this unique challenge in mind along with the previously introduced challenges when presenting identity online, one can see why the investigation of identity development on Twitter is significant and useful.

While the previously conducted research regarding online identity development is vast, there is a lack of research regarding online identity development on Twitter from a communication standpoint. Some examples of popular topics for identity research focus on the online identity development of teenagers (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield & Tynes, 2004; Subrahmanyam, Smahel & Greenfield, 2006; Pierce, 2009), online behavior and identity development in chat rooms (McCarty, Prawitz, Derscheid & Montgomery, 2010; Islam, 2006; Mayzlin, 2006), and the development of romantic relationships online (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006; Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007; Yang & Chiou, 2009). While research on these topics is informative and useful within academia, it displays the lack of focus within academia on how communication plays a part in one’s identity development on Twitter.

This study will be focusing on college students or recent college graduates between the ages of 18 and 25; therefore, it is important to look into aspects of how
online social networking functions in the college student culture. As previously explained, social networking technology has grown exponentially since its creation, and it can be argued that it is now an incredibly prevalent part of the majority of young individuals’ lives. A study conducted in 2008 showed that by the time students reached college, 88% of them reported using the Internet daily, while 86% brought their own laptops to college with them (as seen in Alemán & Wartman, 2008, p. 1). With the rise of technology since this time, it can be assumed that the amount of college students using the Internet and bringing laptops to college with them, as well as the frequency of Internet use, has continued to grow since Alemán & Wartman’s research was conducted. This ongoing growth of social networking use amongst college students can be reflected in a plethora of recently published studies (Mastrodicasa & Metellus, 2013; DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield & Fiore, 2012; Wang, Tchernev & Solloway, 2012).

While this study was designed to determine the strategies used by Twitter users to develop and portray their online identity, the other purpose was to place the strategies within a theoretical framework that focuses on identity development and portrayal. The framework chosen for this study was Michael L. Hecht’s Communication Theory of Identity. This theory was seen as applicable because of its emphasis on identity as communication, instead of identity as just a product of communication. “CTI focuses more on mutual influences between identity and communication and conceptualizes identity as communication rather than seeing identity as merely a product of communication or vice versa” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p.
Twitter is ultimately a tool designed for the purpose of communication; therefore, it seems fitting that a theory following this design is the most appropriate. Beyond its main premise, CTI specifies four frames where identity resides. These four frames are known as the personal frame, the enactment frame, the relationship frame, and the communal frame. These frames are not meant to be seen as separate from each other, but are instead meant to be seen as coexisting and developing through each other. After developing the four frames, Hecht and his colleague Eura Jung (2004) realized that there might be aspects of each person’s identity that can lead to dialectical tensions between the frames. It is because of this realization that the concept of identity gaps was developed. Identity gaps are meant to explain these dialectical tensions, as well as show how dialectical tensions between frames can give insight into one’s identity. As explained by Jung and Hecht (2004), “the frames interpenetrate each other with dialectical tensions between and among them” (p. 267).

Many communication theories have been utilized in order to research different aspects of online identity, such as covert racism in blogs (Kurubacak, 2008), public sector engagement (Barnard-Willis & Ashenden, 2013), communication of online hate groups (Mcnamee, Peterson, & Peña, 2010), online communication about suicide (Leonard & Toller 2012), and much more. However, the use of CTI does not seem to be prevalent within online identity research. Also, there are many qualitative studies that look at trends in online identity development, but the amount of qualitative studies looking at this seems to be
lacking. This study uses qualitative research techniques while utilizing CTI to
explore online identity development, and hopes to bridge this gap within academia.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Public interest in social networking websites has grown exponentially since its creation. “Social networking technology is the generic name used for a range of Internet based techniques for communicating online” (Goodings, Locke, & Brown, 2007, p. 463). Prior to the Internet that we know today, the Internet in the early nineties was very one-sided (Morris, 2010, p. 9). Morris (2010) explains this one-sided Internet concept as the presentation of information in a static format (p. 9). This type of information sharing, while useful and incredibly innovative for its time, did not allow incoming users to participate in the information that was being shared. “The development of more powerful scripting languages such as ASP and PHP” allowed for more interaction from visitors, such as the addition of comments on topics began by the host of the webpage (Morris, 2010, p. 9). After this technique was mirrored and further developed, social networking websites began to spring up, one after the other. Ever since this exponentially growing popularity in social networking, members of academia have inevitably begun to focus on many aspects within social networking and online identity development. This study hopes to add to this growing trend in academia by focusing on identity development and portrayal on Twitter.

This chapter will begin with a review of the literature focusing on online identity research. This will provide the reader with an understanding of how Twitter fits into this research, as well as the differentiation between online and offline identity development. Next, a review of research on Twitter will be
presented. The purpose of this is to provide a background on not only the previously conducted research on Twitter, but also the foundational aspects of Twitter. Next, the theoretical foundations of the CTI will be explored. Identity research is extensive and deep-rooted, and is therefore necessary to comprehend when analyzing online identity. Lastly, specific aspects of CTI will be presented.

**Online Identity**

Online identity has been widely researched within many different fields of academia. In order to better understand the communicative aspects of the continuously growing “cyberculture,” this study primarily utilized research from the fields of Speech Communication and Anthropology. First, it is important to look at the type of research practices that have been utilized to study online identity. While qualitative data regarding online identity does exist, the studies regarding online identity are primarily quantitative (Ke, Chavez, Causarano & Causarano, 2011; Hindaju & Patchin, 2008; Williams, Kennedy & Moore, 2010; Young, 2009). Although quantitative research regarding online identity is useful and informative, it seems as though qualitative research regarding online identity has the potential to reach more in-depth findings. Because this research will be taking a qualitative approach, examples of online identity research that follow this method will be presented. Qualitative research that explores aspects of identity in online settings has focused on areas such as the online identity development of teenagers (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield & Tynes, 2004; Subrahmanyam, Smahel & Greenfield, 2006; Pierce, 2009), online behavior and identity development in chat
rooms (McCarty, Prawitz, Derscheid & Montgomery, 2010; Islam, 2006; Mayzlin, 2006), and the development of romantic relationships online (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006; Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007; Yang & Chiou, 2009). This research has given insight into the ways that individuals express and build their identity in an online setting, and how online identity development differs from identity development and portrayal in a face-to-face setting. These differences found in these studies vary based on the subject matter, and are incredibly complex. To summarize some of the differing complications that arise when developing an online identity, Paechter (2013) focuses on the online identity development of youth, stating

> the proliferation of social networking and its popularity among young people means that performed identities are increasingly collaboratively constructed, with the individual having less control over their public image than was previously the case (p. 1).

Furthermore, this lessening of control coming from the individual can lead to “an increased visibility and a blurring of public and private, frontstage and backstage arenas” (Paechter, 2013, p. 1). These are the main differences between online and offline identity development that is considered in this study.

From an anthropological perspective, research focuses on the “cultural constructions and reconstructions on which the new technologies are based and which they in turn help to shape” (Escobar, Hess, Licha, Sibley, Strathern, & Sutz, 1993, p. 211). With the continuing rise in new technologies of communication comes a transformation in the structure of modern society and culture (Escobar et
In order to explain anthropologists’ role in the investigation of this rise in technological communication, Escobar et al. (1994) stated the following:

Not only is this transformation clearly susceptible to anthropological inquiry but it constitutes perhaps a privileged arena for advancing anthropology’s project of understanding human societies from the vantage points of biology, language, history, and culture (p. 211).

By using these vantage points to explore what Escobar et al. (1994) refer to as “cyberculture,” anthropologists are able to reach a better understanding of the implications, whether they are positive or negative, of a society that has rapidly increased its communication through the use of technology.

It is impossible to investigate computer-mediated communication within the context of anthropology without understanding it as operating within the period of modernity. According to Escobar et al. (1994),

Modernity has been characterized by theoreticians such as Foucault (1973), Habermas (1987), and Giddens (1989) in terms of the continuous appropriation of taken-for-granted cultural backgrounds and practices by explicit mechanisms of knowledge and power (p. 213).

With modernity, many aspects of every day life that were previously regulated by traditional norms have been progressively appropriated by technological and administrative associations (Escobar et al., 1994). Because of this, anthropologists have found the investigation of the cultural implications of a world in which technology is increasingly piloting social interaction to be imperative.

Escobar et al. (1994) identify four categories of inquiry that anthropological research might be guided in when investigating the nature of cyberculture. This
study can be seen to operate within the first of these four categories of inquiry.

Escobar et al. (1994) ask the following questions to investigate the first category,

What are the discourses and practices that are generated around/by computers and biotechnology? What domains of human activity do these discourses and practices create? In what larger social networks of institutions, values, conventions, etc., are these domains situated? More generally, what new forms of social construction of reality ("technoscopes") and of negotiation of such construction(s) are introduced by the new technologies? How do people routinely engage technoscapes, and what are the consequences of doing so in terms of the adoption of new ways of thinking and being? In what ways do our social and ethical practices change as the project of technoscience advances? (p. 214).

Due to the focus of this category on potential changes in discourse that arise when new technologies are introduced, the investigation of strategies used by Twitter users to develop and portray online identity can be seen to operate within this category of inquiry and furthermore, to add to the necessarily increasing academic discourse surrounding the development of new technologies.

**Twitter**

When considering aspects of online identity, Twitter provides a unique setting because of the limits regarding the length of posts. Twitter is considered to be a microblogging tool (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007, p. 56). Microblogging is described as a tool that allows users to easily share status messages through instant messages, mobile phones, email, or the web (Java et al., 2007, p. 56). One of the main dissimilarities between Twitter and other popular social networking websites is its use of the microblogging technique. Messages or broadcasts on Twitter must be at
or below 140 characters. The limited length of these messages is what categorizes Twitter as being a microblogging social networking tool.

Users on Twitter have the option of “following” other users, and vice versa. Unlike other social networking websites, one’s option to follow or be followed does not necessarily need to be reciprocated by the other (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010, p. 591). If user A chooses to follow user B, user B does not need to reciprocate the act of following user A back. Users commonly connect to each other by sending semi-public messages (depending on their privacy settings), known as tweets. This is done by placing the “@” symbol in front the users name with whom you want to communicate. Another way to interact with other users is to “re-tweet” them. In doing this, a user is replicating a tweet that another user posted, and sharing it on his or her own profile. This leads to one user’s tweets to be further shared to other users who may not be following him or her. Another form of common practice seen on Twitter is the use of “hashtags,” represented by the “#” symbol. When a word (or composite of words) is (are) placed after the hashtag symbol, this tweet will show up on a separate page, with tweets from other users who also used the same word or composite of words. This function allows users to interact or observe the tweets of other users who are communicating about the same topic or information.

The creation and use of hashtags by Twitter users has developed what Zappavigna (2011) refers to as the concept of searchable talk. Due to the a priori nature of tagging (Huang, Thornton & Efthimiadis, 2010), Zappavigna (2011) explains that there has been a shift in the purpose of the online search function.
This shift has gone from being for the purpose of content retrieval to functioning as a way for individuals to find out what people are saying about a particular topic, and subsequently forming communities of shared value. Zappavigna (2011) theorizes, “search is beginning to function as a community-building linguistic activity” (p. 2). Through quantitative research utilizing a theory of language known as Systemic Functional Linguistics, Zappavigna (2011) concluded by stating, “Twitter offers a medium for expressing personal evaluation to a large body of listeners with which one can affiliate ambiently” (p. 16).

Now that the logistics of Twitter have been explained, the classification of users seen on Twitter will be explored. Page (2012) classifies the types of users on Twitter as falling under one of the three following categories: corporate, celebrity, and ‘ordinary’. While these categories were originally used to identify the three types of twitter accounts (p. 185), these classifications were found useful in this study to identify the type of information being shared on Twitter. In this study, corporate information on Twitter is seen as news or sports updates. Celebrity information is seen as information pertaining to a specific person who can be considered to hold the title of ‘celebrity’. According to Page (2012), ‘celebrity’ should not be regarded as a “static attribute, but rather a performed status” (p. 199). Furthermore, celebrity information in this study will be considered to be information about specific individuals “whose activities were documented in mainstream media channels” (Page, 2012, p. 199). Lastly, ‘ordinary’ information
refers to updates about “individuals rather than a corporation, and those individuals were not constructed as famous in the mainstream media” (Page, 2012, p. 185).

**Theoretical Foundations of Communication Theory of Identity**

Now that the context of Twitter as a social networking platform has been explained, the theoretical framework for the theory that will be used to explore Twitter will be investigated. Research regarding the construction of an individual or group of individuals’ identities has been an interest in the behavioral and social sciences for many years. In his 1959 work, *The presentation of self in everyday life*, Goffman (1959) conceptualized the idea of an individual constantly performing his or her identity, as if on a stage. Continuing in this line of research, Collier (1997) presented the idea of an individual’s self-image, as well as this individual’s social behavior and its relation to his or her ascribed identity.

The consciousness of the perception of the self to the audience is illustrated in Cooley’s (1902) concept of the looking-glass self, which describes the idea that social beings create mental perceptions of themselves based on how they believe others perceive them. Cooley (1902) states:

> As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another’s mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it (p. 152).

Furthermore, Cooley (1902) explains that the severity of the impact that this perceived image on the individual is determined by “the imagined effect of this
reflection upon another’s mind” (p. 152). Therefore, the influence that the perceived image has on the individual can vary based on whoever they are crafting the image from.

The concept of internally conceptualized images of the self based on others is further explored in Mead's (1934) concept of the “I” and the “Me” aspects of Symbolic Interactionism which was later coined by Mead’s student, Blumer. While Cooley (1902) first described the concept of “I” as one’s “self-feeling,” Mead (1934) expands on this idea when describing the concept of the “I” and the “Me.” Mead describes the self and the mind in terms of a social process. He describes the “Me” as the social self, and the “I” as a response to the social self. The “Me,” similar to concepts seen in Cooley’s looking-glass self, is the organized set of attitudes of others, based on assumptions made by the individual. Furthermore, Mead (1934) describes the “I” as the individual’s reactions to these assumed perceptions (p. 174).

Recently, scholars have continued this interest in identity to focus more on the connection between communication and the formation of identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 265). While CTI advances these interests even further, there are foundational theories that have helped in this advancement: Social Identity Theory and Identity Theory. Each of these theories, in their own regard, has created foundational aspects of CTI.

Social Identity Theory was originally introduced by Tajfel (1974) as a way to introduce intergroup behavior as a concept within social identity (p. 65). Following this idea, Turner partnered with Tajfel and
posited a distinction between personal and social identity, which they argued underpinned the difference between interpersonal situations (in which behavior is mainly under the control of personological variables) and ingroup situations (determined largely by category-based processes) (Brown, 2000, p. 746).

Social Identity Theory states that social categories exist within any society (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005, p. 259). These categories include, but are not limited to, race, gender, age, and class. According to this theory, individuals create and manage their social identity based on the social categories to which they belong. The social categories that individuals identify with aid them in forming social connections, through accepted and maintained membership to particular categories. In turn, membership to these groups influences individuals’ beliefs, attitudes and behavior (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 259). Within Social Identity Theory, the emphasis is on social aspects of identity, more than individual aspects of identity. Social Identity Theory has been used in a plethora of research, focusing on information such as educational engagement (Kelly, 2009), organizational socialization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and the development of national identity in relation to the European Union (Curley, 2009). The purpose of understanding Social Identity Theory as a foundational aspect of CTI is to view social interaction as an aspect of one’s identity.

Identity Theory is also important to comprehend as a foundational aspect of CTI. Hecht, Warren, Jung, and Krieger (2005) describe Identity Theory as a “product of Symbolic Interactionism” (p. 260). As previously introduced, Symbolic Interactionism was first coined by Blumer, conceptualizing the previously introduced philosophies from his mentor, Mead. Blumer describes Symbolic
Interactionism as being both a perspective (a way of looking at the world), as well as a method (a way of studying the world, or gathering data) (Elliot, 2010, p. 37). In his 1986 explanation of this concept, appropriately titled Symbolic Interactionism, Blumer presented three previously established premises of the theory, as well as six additional “root images”. The three premises of the theory are as follows. Premise one states that people act towards things based on the meaning that these things have for them (Blumer, 1986, p.2). Premise two explains that these meaning are created through social interaction (Blumer, 1986, p. 2). Lastly, premise three states that these meanings are modified through an informative process used by the person in handling the things he or she faces (Blumer, 1986, p. 2).

In addition, the six root images of the theory explain how symbolic interaction views human society and conduct (Blumer, 1986). Ideas expressed in these root images range from the idea that social life exists in action and must be studied as such, to describing the human as an active agent who is less psychologically driven, and more driven by the self as an object (Blumer, 1986). These root images frame the theory in a way that clarifies how human interaction influences one’s identity.

Beyond its foundational aspects derived from Symbolic Interactionism, Identity Theory focuses on aspects of individual and group roles. Similar to Symbolic Interactionism, the purpose of Identity Theory is to clarify the relationship between society and individuals (Hecht et al., 2005). In fact, “Symbolic
Interactionism influenced the development of role theory,” and is utilized in concepts of Identity Theory (Schlenker, 1985, p. 18)

In Identity Theory, the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance (Burke and Tully 1977; Thoits 1986) (as cited in Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225).

The concept of roles within Identity Theory is derived from concepts regarding the functions that one plays within a certain social system, as well as the fulfillment of expectations from others within that social situation (Schlenker, 1985; Banton, 1965). It is important to note that, “like social identity theory, identity theory deals principally with the components of a structured society” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). Therefore, when acting within the context of social structure, individuals recognize one another as occupants of roles, and in turn name one another and themselves based on these roles (Stets & Burke, 2000). Identity Theory has been used in studies looking at many different areas of identity, such as understanding of the moral self (Carter, 2011), identity-relevant stressors (Thoits, 1991), emotional reactions to identity nonverification (Stets, 2005), and many more.

**Communication Theory of Identity**

While role theories and inquiries such as those listed above are informative, they fall short in that they do not conceptualize how one’s role or identification are communicated in a social setting (Hecht et al., 2005). Identity Theory shows how one’s role is a means for expressing identity; however, it does not identify roles and the communication that individuals participate in based on these roles as being an
actual aspect within one’s identity. In order to fill this gap, CTI shows the ways that one’s social behaviors, or roles, become an aspect of one’s identity. Furthermore, one regains a sense of self as emerging and becoming defined through social interaction. CTI “[locates] communication as the process through which the individual and social environment interact” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 261). Keeping these juxtapositions in mind, one can see the ways that CTI fills existing gaps in theories regarding identity development, as well as role theories.

CTI was developed, almost indirectly, through research looking at ethnic differences in communication (Hecht et al., 2005). While researching intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic communication similarities and differences, Hecht et al. (2005) became interested in the connection within these “ethnic identities” between identity and communication (p. 261). CTI eventually focused on the idea that identity should be seen as actual communication, instead of just a product of communication. Hecht, Collier, and Ribeau (1993) identified two ways which social relations and roles are internalized as identity. First, meanings are created through interaction. “Symbolic meanings of social phenomena are created and exchanged through social interaction” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 262). Second, these meanings are validated by the relevance of categories that individuals place themselves into. “[...] When people place themselves into socially recognizable categories, as noted by social identity theory, they confirm or validate through social interaction whether these categories are relevant to them” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 262). Thus, there is a process of internalization and externalization in social interaction, “through
expectations attached to identities and other social categories” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 262).

CTI identifies nine basic assumptions, which the authors accept to be observable and testable. The nine assumptions are used to express identities as enduring, changing, negotiable, affective, cognitive, and behavioral (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). Also, these assumptions explain how identities have both content and relationship levels of interpretation and involve both subjective and ascribed meanings (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). Furthermore, the assumptions state that identities are codes that are expressed in conversations and have semantic properties that are expressed in core symbol, meanings, and labels (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). Lastly, identities prescribe modes of appropriate and effective communication (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). To sum up all the assumptions, identity is described as existing within four frames: personal, relationship, enactment, and communal. Each of the assumptions can be applied to each of the frames, as well as their interpretations with each other (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003, p. 235).

The four frames where identity is seen to reside represent different aspects of an individual’s identity. These four frames are not meant to be seen as separate from each other, but are instead meant to be seen as coexisting and developing through each other. While this may be true, there are times when one or more of the frames contradicts another. This being said, none of the frames can exist without the others.
The personal frame is an individual’s self-concept or self-image. This refers to one’s feelings about him or herself, as well as the way in which an individual defines him or herself. Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau (2003) identify three assumptions of identity as a personal frame. These assumptions are as follows:

1. Identities are hierarchically ordered meanings attributed to the self as an object in a social situation;
2. Identities are meanings ascribed to the self by others in the social world;
3. Identities are a source of expectations and motivations (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003, p. 236).

The second frame acknowledges identity as an enactment. This frame states that there is a social aspect to one’s identity development and this is done through communication. This focuses on the messages that express identity. As Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau (2003) explain, “[...] identity may be expressed as part of a message or may be the central feature of the message, and messages may express more than identity (i.e., they tell us about the talk, relationship, and so on)” (p. 236). The characteristics of identity as enactment are as follows:

1. Identities are emergent;
2. Identities are enacted in social behaviors, social roles, and symbols (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003, p. 236).

The third frame of CTI is known as identity as a relationship. As previously stated, identities are social constructions and are created through social interaction. One individual’s social behavior may merge with another individual’s social behavior, creating a relationship that has an identity in and of itself. Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau (2003) explain four ways in which identity can be considered to be
relational. First, individuals define themselves based on other’s opinions of them, which is shaped through their enactments with these others. Second, individuals define themselves in terms of their relationships with others. Third, the relationships that are created through communication actually take on their own identity. Lastly, identities exist in relationship to other identities. Along with these four ways which identity can be constructed as relational, Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau (2003) present three assumptions of identity as relationship, which are as follows:

1. Identities emerge in relationship to other people;
2. Identities are enacted in relationships;
3. Relationships develop identities as social entities (p. 237).

The fourth and final frame seen in CTI is known as identity as a communal frame. This frame states that identity is something “held in the collective or public memory of a group that, in turn, bonds the group together” (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003, p. 237). This creates an actual identity for the group or community. Certain identities are held by this group and taught to new members, so that the identity continues throughout time. Characteristics or assumptions from identity as personal frame can be carried over and applied to identity as a communal frame; however, one more assumption can be added to this frame, which is as follows:

1. Identities emerge out of groups and networks (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003, p. 238).

Through the development of the CTI, Hecht and his colleagues began to discover dialectical tensions that existed between the identity frames. These
dialectical tensions were branded as “identity gaps” (Jung & Hecht, 2004). While some of the frames in certain situations may contradict each other, they still coexist and work together as part of an individual’s identity. For example, Twitter as a social networking website may perform in a certain way (communal frame), while individuals who participate in Twitter (enactment frame) may use it in a way that contradicts its communal identity, creating a tension between the communal frame and the enactment frame. These individuals may consider their own identity on Twitter to be separate from the larger communal identity of all Twitter users.

CTI has been used to explore many specific natures of identity. For example, after developing the theory, Hecht, with the aid of other theorists (Faulkner, Meyer, Niles, Golden, and Cutler), used his theory to explore the representation of Jewish American identity on the television program “Northern Exposure”. In this study, Hecht et al. (2002) utilized the four frames of the theory to show how “Northern Exposure” exemplified the Jewish culture in North America. In doing this, Hecht et al. illustrated how each frame was exemplified on the program. Hecht continued working with other theorists and utilizing CTI to explore many different examples of identity development, such as the investigation of the role of identity gaps among communicative and relational outcomes within the grandparent-grandchild relationship (Kam & Hecht, 2009), the role of identity gaps, discrimination, and acculturation in international students’ educational satisfaction in the American classroom (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2009), and the relational identities of always-single Japanese women over time (Maeda & Hecht, 2012). Other aspects within CTI
have also been utilized by additional theorists. For instance, Drummond and Orbe (2009) utilized the concept of identity gaps within the scope of interracial communication encounters. In addition, Pettigrew (2013) used CTI to highlight the importance of the enactment frame in defining the developing role of a stepfather. The previously mentioned studies are only a few of the many examples of CTI being utilized within identity research. While these studies utilizing CTI have helped to gain insight into identity development from many different aspects of identity, CTI has yet to be used to look at the development and portrayal of online identity. This research hopes to bridge this gap between CTI and online identity and to add to the growing research that specifically explores the social networking tool of Twitter by investigating these two research questions:

a) What strategies do Twitter users utilize in order to develop and portray their online identity on Twitter?

b) How can these strategies of identity development and portrayal utilized on Twitter be understood as operating within the personal, the enactment, the relationship, and the communal frames?

Following this chapter, the methodology chapter will present information relating to the logistics of this study. The purpose of the methodology chapter is to achieve a better understanding of the reasoning behind the use of qualitative data as a means to answer the previously stated research questions, as well as an explanation of the process of this research.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the ways that individuals develop and portray their online identity on Twitter; therefore, an approach utilizing in-depth interviews seemed to be the most appropriate and beneficial tactic to accomplish this goal. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted, in which participants were asked questions regarding their use of Twitter. Questions during the interviews ranged from topics concerning the initial conception of a tweet to thoughts and feelings about perceived reactions from other users to a tweet. The research questions that these interviews were designed to explore were:

a) What strategies do Twitter users utilize in order to develop and portray their online identity on Twitter?

b) How can these strategies of identity development and portrayal utilized on Twitter be understood as operating within the personal, the enactment, the relationship, and the communal frames?

This chapter will present the following sections: Reflexivity, History of Qualitative Research, Protocol, Procedure, and Participants.

Reflexivity

Although I had already had a Twitter account for a couple of years, it was not until graduate school that I became interested in studying online identity on Twitter. Identity development had always been something that greatly interested me and with the development of a heightened sense of critical thinking that emerged during graduate school, I began to think about the different ways that individuals express
themselves through their Twitter accounts. In order to get a better sense of direction for a possible study, I began to ask friends of mine who had Twitter accounts different questions regarding their communication through Twitter. After seeing their excitement when talking about their Twitter accounts, I realized that the exploration of identity development and portrayal on Twitter was something that interested not only me, but also my peers. I began to look for previously conducted research on identity development on Twitter and to my surprise, found that there was a significant lack of research on this topic. It was because of these two realizations that I chose to develop a study that explored strategies used by Twitter users in order to develop and portray their online identity on Twitter.

**History of Qualitative Research**

In order to understand the reasoning behind utilizing qualitative research practices, it is important to understand the historical development of qualitative research. This will not only offer this intended reasoning, but will also provide “a conceptual framework for reading the qualitative research act as a multicultural, gendered process” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2). The development of any definition for qualitative research is deeply embedded in the complex history of qualitative research practices; therefore, this section will intertwine this historical use of qualitative research with the development and understanding of the definition for qualitative research.

While this is not a critical study, historically, both qualitative and quantitative research practices were “used in the name of colonizing powers”
(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2) and “born out of concern to understand the ‘other’” (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 38), and in turn had a very analytical approach. As explained further by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), within the fields of sociology and anthropology, the “other,” was an exotic, primitive, non-white person from a foreign culture (p.2). While the initial use of qualitative research was associated with a racist project (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), one hopes that this realization by current scholars using qualitative methods and the development of more ethical standards within academia can provide scholars with insight that leads towards a better understanding of how qualitative research should be practiced. Within this current study, this was a realization that was prominently kept in mind during every interview with a participant, as well as in the process of analyzing data from these interviews. In doing so, this research is not meant to view the participants as “the other,” but instead is meant to use the voices of the participants, in order to reach a clear understanding of their experiences in developing and portraying their online identities on Twitter.

While the definition of qualitative research is always expanding, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) provide an initial, generic definition, which is as follows:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make
sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 3).

By utilizing the voices of the participants within this study and not creating unjustified assumptions based on their voices, this research hopes to closely follow this definition, in order to appropriately utilize qualitative research methods and ethical standards.

According to Berg (2009), there are seven primary ways to collect qualitative data. Berg (2009) identifies these ways as “interviewing, focus groups, ethnography, sociometry, unobtrusive measures, historiography, and case studies” (p. 4). Because this is an interview study, understanding the background and history of interviewing is imperative. According to Fontana and Frey (1994), “interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow humans” (p. 362). Information is so excessively acquired in this day and age that certain scholars say we live in an “interview society” (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). The focus of interviews has begun to shift towards looking at the hows of people’s lives, as well as the traditional whats (Cicourel, 1964). This is to say that interviewing looks at both the constructive ways with which people live their lives, as well as the activities within their lives. This shift in interviewing fits perfectly with the design of this study; the how aiding in the understanding of the strategies that Twitter users utilize in order to develop and portray their online identity on Twitter, and the what covering the ways that these strategies fit into the personal, the enactment, the relationship, and the communal frames.
While this will primarily be an interview study, I have noted the importance of utilizing a method of triangulation within qualitative research. Berg (2009) describes triangulation as “[…] the use of multiple data-gathering techniques […] to investigate the same phenomenon (p. 6). Additionally, N. Fielding and J. L. Fielding (1986) explain that the importance of triangulation lies not in the simple combination of data-gathering techniques, but in the attempt to combine them in a way that prevents weaknesses that are normally seen in each of the specific techniques. This study will primarily focus on an interview method, and will incorporate the viewing of the participant’s twitter feeds as a form of observation. These two types of data gathering techniques will be further explained in this chapter. This study anticipates the use of interviews and observational data to provide for insightful results regarding the development and portrayal of online identity on Twitter.

This study utilized a semistandardized interview style (Berg, 2009, p. 107). According to Bruce L. Berg (2009), “this type of interview involves the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and special topics” (p. 107). This study is categorized as a semistandardized interview study because of the use of both a systematic consistent order of the questions, as well as the allowance of freedom to digress. The specific tactics and questions used in the interviews will be further explained later in this chapter.

Protocol
The questions used for these interviews were crafted in order to ensure that there would be an extraction of data that answered both of the previously stated research questions (see the appendix for a copy of the interview protocol). Due to the fact that public Twitter accounts were used in this study, the element of confidentiality was taken into account. Each participant read and signed a consent form, allowing for the use of data found during the interviews in this study. While pseudonyms were utilized in this study in order to achieve maximum confidentiality, the public, online aspect seemed to blur this goal of confidentiality. During the portion of the interview when the participant was asked questions about specific tweets seen on his or her Twitter profile, further consent was gained as to whether or not those tweets could be used within the research. No tweets were used in this study that were not approved by the participants during the interviews.

Procedure

There were three main requirements for an individual to be eligible to participate in this study. The first requirement was that the individual was over the age of 18. This study is focusing on young adult identity development on Twitter, and since the legal age of consent in Oregon is 18, it was imperative that the participants were all over the age of 18. The second requirement was that the individual has a public Twitter account at the time of the study. The reasoning behind this requirement was due to the difference in interaction between public and private Twitter accounts. The use of hashtags and interaction with other users differentiates between public and private accounts, so public accounts were chosen
in order to reach a desired level of consistency. The third and final requirement for this study was that the individual used his or her Twitter account at least once a week. The purpose of this requirement was to find frequent Twitter users, in order to receive more rich, fulfilling data.

Flyers were created in order to recruit participants. These flyers specified the three requirements for participation in this study, as stated above. Interested participants were asked to email the research investigator to set up an interview appointment. In order to find users that actually interacted with each other on Twitter, a snowball sampling technique was also used. After the interview concluded, participants were offered the opportunity to provide the names and email addresses of other Twitter users who they thought would be useful for this study. The participants were asked for permission to use their name when attempting to recruit these suggested individuals.

Once the interview was scheduled, confirmation of the three requirements being met was obtained. Once this confirmation was obtained, the participant was asked to thoroughly read and sign the consent form. The consent form specified that an audio-recorder would be used during the interview, and also that the participant had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. If a participant chose to withdraw from the study, the information previously maintained would not be used in the study. Once the consent form was signed, the interview began.

As explained earlier, the participants were interviewed and asked to describe specific aspects regarding their use of Twitter. Not only were the participants asked
questions about their Twitter account, but there was also a portion of the interview when the participant and the interviewer looked directly at their Twitter profile, and discussed specific tweets and interactions seen on the profile. These interviews were roughly thirty minutes long.

**Participants**

After utilizing the recruitment techniques explained above, 15 participants were found (10 female and 5 male). The ages of participants ranged from 20 to 25. All participants resided near the university that the study was conducted at, and were either in the process of receiving a Bachelor’s degree or had already done so. As previously stated, in order to maintain confidentiality, each participant that was interviewed was given a pseudonym.

Data in this study was analyzed in a way to ensure that the participants’ voices were accurately portrayed. In doing this, a transcription for each interview was created. Next, the transcriptions were explored for common themes within them. The two methods of data collection (interviews and observations) were both gathered during the interview, and were amalgamated during the analysis process. The connection of these two forms of data allowed for a broader analysis process, which in turn permitted the creation of comprehensive themes. After prominent themes were found, the data was reorganized and combined, based on each theme. Lastly, larger thematic categories were explored for more detailed subthemes within the data. Each process of organization and exploration was based exclusively on the words expressed by the participants. The themes in the analysis chapter
were derived solely from interview and observational data. After these themes were found, the discussion chapter was created to address the connection of the data to the four frames of CTI.
CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

As previously stated, the data collected from participants in this study was used to answer the following research questions:

a) What strategies do Twitter users utilize in order to develop and portray their online identity on Twitter?

b) How can these strategies of identity development and portrayal utilized on Twitter be understood as operating within the personal, the enactment, the relationship, and the communal frames?

This chapter will present four themes that are intended to answer the first research question. In doing this, these themes will outline and explain strategies that are utilized by Twitter users to develop and portray their online identity on Twitter. The next chapter will demonstrate how these four themes operate within the personal, the enactment, the relationship, and the communal frames; thus answering the second research question presented above.

This chapter is based on a combination of the interview data and the observational data. While these two forms of data gathering were treated separately during the interview, they naturally merged together in the analysis. The majority of observational data collected was used when analyzing information regarding participant explanation of their profile headlines; however, other topics of discussion were seen to innately emerge when observational data was collected.
Through this research, four themes were found. These themes will be referred to as: Representation of the Self, Acknowledgment of the Audience, Purpose of Twitter as a Means to Stay Updated and/or Update Others, and Comparison to Other Social Networks. Subthemes within each of these four themes will also be presented in this section.

**Representation of the Self**

This section will present data that illustrates this realization by participants of Twitter as a medium for the expression of identity, as well as participant desire to represent themselves in a particular way. Next, strategies used by participants to express their identity in a particular way will be presented. The strategies that will be presented are an attempt to relate, and topic avoidance.

The majority of participants in this study expressed a desire to represent themselves in a specific light on Twitter. Furthermore, these participants expressed an understanding of Twitter as a medium where identity is expressed. For example, Neddie stated, “It’s still something about you. It still affects you, because your identity is still tied to your Twitter account.” One can see here that Neddie recognizes and understands Twitter as a medium that ties her identity to her Twitter account.

**Desire to represent self in a specific manner.** As briefly illustrated above, participants in this study generally expressed a desire to portray their identity in a positive light. Morgan describes her Twitter account as “a reflection of the things in life that [she] value[s].” She continues to explore this idea by stating
I think overall, I try to make my Twitter something that’s positive and informative. Not necessarily positive in a super happy, go-lucky way, but just not a cynical of a world that everyone else thinks it is.

From this quotation, one can see that Morgan is consciously aware of the idea that her Twitter account is a representation of her own identity. Information received from Rosanne further supports this idea of Twitter as an image of oneself:

I mean, everyone’s Twitter kind of has an image, I guess, even though I don’t have a lot of [followers]... like if a celebrity had [a lot] of followers, they’re more concerned about it than I ever would be. But I still just want to represent myself in the right way, even if Twitter is still a little bit more free than other social media.

Rosanne’s realization that everyone’s Twitter profile has an image seems to increase her interest in representing herself in a specific way.

Many participants expressed similar ideas to this when explaining their profile headlines. At the top of each Twitter profile, the user has the opportunity to present information that is located next to their username and profile picture. While the type of information presented here is completely at the disposition of the user, most participants in this study utilized this space as a way to present a general understanding of who they are as a person. For example, when describing how she chose her headline, Jolee stated:

At first I didn’t really know what to put. And I didn’t want to write “hi I’m [Jolee]” because I didn’t want it to be awkward. So I thought statements are easy, and people know it’s about me. It’s kind of what I want people to know about me, especially for photography. If someone’s thinking about hiring me or if someone even is just curious like, oh I want to follow [Jolee], we met in class today, what’s she about? It allows them just to know the things that I enjoy or things I’m proud of.
Neddie expressed similar ideas to this, regarding her headline, when she stated:

When I first got my Twitter my mom was like, “what are you going to put as your headline?” And I saw hers and it looked very professional. And I do kind of tie Twitter into the professional sphere. I know that a lot of younger people have it these days but it seemed like a social media form that my boss could follow me on, or people I work with. So I wanted to make it seem pretty professional, but I also wanted to give a brief abstract of who I am.

From the above quotations, one can see that these users are utilizing the headline portion of their profile to express their identity in the way that they want to be seen by others.

Participants also noted the influence that interactions with others can have on the portrayal of their own identity. When responding to a question exploring a time when she received a reply from another user that she was not anticipating, Agneta explained how this made her feel:

Umm I don’t know, I was probably just surprised. I mean, I guess I’ve probably gotten a few tweets where I’m like, I can’t believe you just tweeted that, because it’s public and I’m like, uh shh, watch what you talk about on here.

Ellie also expressed this idea when discussing a tweet sent to her from an acquaintance, which did not portray her in the light that she preferred. Ellie stated:

I just thought it was unprofessional, and it’s not really what I’m about. Like, I’m not really about putting all my personal [information]. That’s something that’s really personal and I think that it’s something that you only talk about with friends or like-minded individuals. But to post it online, I think it’s a little too extreme.

From the above quotations, it is evident participants see their identity as being affected by relational aspects. If someone on Twitter says something that does not
portray them in the way that they would like to be portrayed, this influences their self-image, as well as the assumed perception that they believe others develop about their identity.

In order to achieve the goal of representing themselves on Twitter in a particular way, information from this study shows a consciousness of the audience to whom the participants presented information. For example, Jolee stated:

When I tweet, I definitely have an audience in mind. I don't just, I mean sometimes I say random things, but at the same time I’m still keeping that audience in mind, like, are they going to think this is funny? Or are they going to read this and smile?

As one can see from this quote, Jolee was not only conscious of her audience, but also realized the influence that this consciousness of the audience has on what she chooses to tweet. This idea could also be seen in Tony's statement: “If more of my bosses or other kind of important people would follow me it would change the way I tweet, yeah. As of right now I don’t have a lot of super important people on there.”

Here, one can see a distinction between the types of potential users on Twitter, and their influence on how Tony chooses to portray his identity.

Similar to information given from Tony, some participants not only recognized a general audience, but also noted specific people or groups who influenced how they chose to portray themselves on Twitter. For example, Mei stated,

Well one of my favorite bands, Medicine for the People, started following me the other day, and I was like, oh man, I don’t want to tweet something that’s not cool now. So, I don’t know, my friends already know how silly I am, but they don’t.
Mei consciously thought about this new follower that she received, which she described as determinedly influencing her use of Twitter. This was also seen when Neddie described the process of creating a tweet. Neddie stated:

I don’t know, you do it to impress other people really. Like, if there’s someone that’s following you that you’re interested in, then you kind of want to say things that you think that person would enjoy or, like, just to inform them. It kind of clues them in to who you are.

Here, one can see that Neddie thinks about an audience, including specific individuals when crafting her tweets. Mei and Neddie’s comments demonstrate the influence that audience consciousness can have on the information that Twitter users choose to share, which is a concept that will be further explained in the second theme.

**Strategies used to present aspects of identity.** As introduced above, participants in this study expressed a desire to portray themselves in a particular light on Twitter. With the consciousness of an audience, participants in this study noted specific strategies used in order to achieve the goal of representing themselves in a particular way. The two strategies found were an attempt to relate and topic avoidance. While not every participant in this study used both of these strategies, these were the most commonly referenced strategies noted during interviews.

**Attempt to relate.** By being conscious of their audience, Twitter users have the ability to present tweets that their audience is able to relate to. Many participants in this study noted this desire to relate to those whom they are
presenting information for. This idea could be seen when Kristy explained the
process of creating a tweet:

So I think like the process of thinking about what you’re going to do
and then trying to incorporate some sort of relatable value to your
followers, so that they can also read it and know what you’re talking
about and maybe respond, maybe don’t, but they also just know the
feeling. And so I think that’s important. I would say it does take a
significant amount of time to think about what you’re going to say
before you say it. It’s pretty much general and like anything you want
to post online, you want to be respectful, but you also want to get
some sort of emotion out of your followers.

From this quotation, one can see Kristy’s desire to create tweets that her audience
can relate to. Participants in this study not only explained a desire to relate to their
audience in general, but many recognized specific users who could relate to the
information that they were sharing. For example, when explaining the process of
creating a tweet Walter stated:

So, I see something that happened, and then I think about if someone
would want to know about that or my opinion on that, and then I
either hashtag things that I think other people would find interesting
or that are related to that, and then I tag the people that I think would
get the most relevance out of it.

In this quotation, one can see that Walter not only thinks about whether or not his
audience will be able to relate to the information that he is presenting in his tweets,
but also thinks about specific users who could relate to the information and chooses
to include these specific users in his tweet. Sam also expressed this idea when
describing the influence that the types of users who follow him have on what he
chooses to tweet. Sam stated the following:
I guess it influences me just because I try to do stuff towards specific people. So if I see something funny I tag my friends that would understand why I think that’s funny or that would think it’s funny too. Or if I tweet something like a song lyric, I tag my friend because it’s about them or it’s a joke we have.

Sam recognizes the influence that the consciousness of his audience has on his tweets, and the desire to relate that comes from this.

Ellie expressed similar ideas to those above; however, she believed that the already similar nature of the types of users who follow her attributes to the information that she presents on Twitter. Ellie stated:

I feel like I’m more personable to like my audience because they’re all relatively the same age. We’re all relatively going through the same places in our lives, so I feel like that’s more of the kind of stuff that I tweet.

Ellie obviously believes that the information that she chooses to tweet is relative and relatable for her audience, because of the fact that they are all close in age and are “going through the same places in [their] lives.”

**Topic avoidance.** Many of the participants not only noted wanting to express their identity in a positive light, but also expressed the attempt to avoid discussing certain topics on their Twitter profile. While these aspects may be a part of their identity, the participants actively chose to avoid expressing this part of their identity on Twitter. For example, a few of the participants commented on an attempt to avoid swearing or using foul language on their Twitter, as Sam states:

I don’t like to swear and I don’t do anything offensive. I guess I kind of think if someone wanted to connect my Twitter to me, I want to make sure it’s not a bad representation of myself.
From this quotation one can see that Sam works to create a positive representation of himself by specifically avoiding negative portrayals of his identity.

As previously alluded, audience consciousness can influence what users choose to tweet. Neddie explains this by emphasizing her awareness of not mentioning certain behaviors in her tweets:

I do have KBVR tv following me and some archeology accounts, so like I do have a little bit of a shield about what I tweet. Like, I'm not going to be like, yeah lighting one up right now, you know? Can I say that? [laughs]. But yeah, I wouldn’t talk about like, I've drank so many beers, even if I have since it's legal to do that. But yeah, you want to keep a good repertoire with your followers.

Because of the fact that Neddie’s followers include professional organizations and corporate accounts she feels as though she should avoid certain topics of discussion. Agneta commented on how certain ‘ordinary’ accounts (as opposed to corporate or celebrity accounts) also influence what she chooses to disclose on Twitter. Agneta stated, “So like having friends follow me, sometimes that will keep me from tweeting things, because I'm like, oh I don't want that friend to see that.” Here, one can see that Agneta chooses to avoid certain topics because of the friends who follow her on Twitter.

Participants in this study also observed the attempt to avoid conflict when on Twitter. While it is safe to say that conflict does exist on Twitter, the participants in this study discussed a general desire to avoid conflict when interacting with others. For example, Walter stated, “I try to avoid anything that’s not politically correct, to a certain extent; anything that would seriously offend anybody. Just because I try to
be considerate of other people’s feelings.” Besides keeping his audience in mind when creating tweets, Walter also attempts to gauge the level of appropriateness of his tweets in order to avoid offending others. Agneta gave an example of her reasoning behind the desire to avoid conflict when she stated:

I’d say I probably avoid [topics] because some of them are hot button issues, like topics that are like going to piss people off. Or just to like keep everything more appropriate I guess, as far as personal details and stuff. Just making sure that it’s not like an over share that I’m not going to want people to know later.

Agneta’s reasoning behind avoiding certain topics, similar to Walter’s, is to avoid conflict with others. Further reasoning behind this can be seen when analyzing Jenda’s comments:

I don’t like starting conflict if it’s not necessary. So I’m not going to tell my opinion of why certain immigration laws should be passed or [my opinion on] gay rights, because it’s a touchy subject for everyone and it’s so hard to back yourself up in 140 characters. There’s a time and a place.

Here, Jenda clearly explains her belief that Twitter is not a forum for controversial topics. Another interesting aspect of this quotation is the influence that the word count allowance on Twitter has on the types of topics that Jenda chooses to tweet about. Because of the 140-character allowance, Jenda concludes that Twitter is not the time or the place to discuss controversial topics.

The attempt to present oneself in a specific way can be seen as a strategy when developing and portraying online identity on Twitter. Participants in this study not only acknowledged this attempt to present themselves in a specific way, but also identified the attempt to relate and topic avoidance as two strategies used
to do so. Now that the attempt of Twitter users to represent themselves in a specific way has been explained, the role that the audience plays in identity development and portrayal on Twitter will be explored.

**Acknowledgment of the Audience**

The second theme that arose from the data focuses on aspects of the audience, as well as the role that the audience played in the participants’ posting of tweets. As previously discussed, many participants in this study commented on the consciousness of the audience, as well as the influence that this consciousness of the audience can have on the information that they choose to disclose on Twitter. Taking this idea one step further, data regarding observed perceptions of the audience was found. This information will be presented in the first sub-theme of this section (observed perceptions of the audience), including an explanation of both positive and negative indications from the audience. The second sub-theme in this section (reactions to observed perceptions of the audience) will explain the responses that participants have based on their perceptions of the audience. This sub-theme will further identify reactions within three categories: feelings of regret, attempt to adjust perceptions, and indifference.

**Observed perceptions of the audience.** Some participants noted a difference between how they believed information was being perceived and how they meant for it to be perceived. This distinction illustrates Mead’s (1934) previously explained concept of the “I” and the “Me.” The “Me” can be seen as the participant’s thoughts regarding how they assumed others perceived the
information they disclosed, and the “I” can be seen as their reactions to these assumed perceptions. This section will present data representing the “Me,” as well as the positive and negative indications that participants believed reinforced their thoughts regarding others perceptions of their tweets.

Participant realization of this distinction could be seen when language was used that alluded to a distinction between the intended and perceived reality of a tweet. For example, Kristy stated, “Often times I’m having a good day and I’ll just be able to formulate a good tweet, or at least to me, I think it’s pretty good.” Here, one can see that although Kristy believe she has formulated a good tweet, she realizes that there is a chance that this tweet could be interpreted differently by her audience. She is creating a distinction between her perception of her identity, and the perception from others about her identity. This idea was also seen when Sam explained aspects that made him proud of a particular tweet. Sam stated:

I want to say on my thousandth tweet I was pretty excited. But I think there have been a couple other ones that I’ve been proud of. Usually it’s song references, it takes like a line or it’s a play on words. So I feel like I’m pretty witty, but I don’t know if others agree [laughs].

When Sam states that he is not sure if others agree, one can see the same distinction as described above, which is between what he believes is witty, and whether or not his followers see the same information as being witty.

**Positive indications.** Many of the participants in this study discussed positive reactions to their tweets from other users, which indicates that the information they expressed was positively received and appropriately understood.
Positive recognition on Twitter can be seen through replies, re-tweets, and favorites. This idea of positive recognition from others was explained by Walter when stating the type of information he tweets about the most. Walter stated, “Usually sports, or funny quotes, or just random pictures. Or just things that I think my friends would think is funny, so hopefully getting a couple re-tweets of favorites.” So, one can see that Walter thinks about his audience, attempts to post relevant information, and hopes for recognition from his followers to show that the information was well received.

This idea of positive reinforcement was explained by Rosanne, when she stated, “Sometimes you think of something really witty and people favorite it and re-tweet it and [...] you feel a little proud about it.” Jolee also shared this idea when she stated, “If people re-tweet me or if they comment or [favorite], it kind of gives me a little signal like, oh hey they liked that.” From these two quotations, one can see that participants in this study recognize and appreciate when their tweets are positively reinforced. This idea was further supported by Jenda when she explained the reason why she was proud of a particular tweet:

I got some re-tweets and favorites and, you know, [it’s] the popularity gain from it. It makes me feel special when people like what I say. But it’s not only that people liked what I said or like favorited it or re-tweeted it, it’s the fact that it sounded good too. It’s like, I was proud of myself for it.

Jenda describes her pleasure when her own pride for a tweet was positively reinforced by recognition from others, through re-tweets and favorites.
There is a distinct difference between re-tweets and favorites on Twitter.

While only one participant, Rurik, discussed this difference, the information shared by him is insightful for this study. Rurik stated,

That’s part of the reason why I tweet so much, to get good tweets that people like and that people favorite and that people re-tweet. Even though I’m way more about re-tweets. I like the responses. I like when people say what I said is funny or what I said is good information. I always tell people favorites are dumb because nobody ever looks at their favorites. I want those re-tweets because I really think the point of Twitter is to take something one person says into that network and expand it, and favorites don’t do that but re-tweets do. So if I say something all of my friends will see it and if your friends say something then all your friends will see it, and so it builds outwards. And I think that’s really the point of Twitter, so favorites seem kind of superfluous. But, you know, I’m not going to cry if someone favorites my tweet. I won’t get mad at them [laughs].

Here, Rurik takes the idea of positive reinforcement further, since re-tweeting can expand one’s network. Not only does re-tweeting create positive reinforcement for the user, it also expands ideas further, which provides potential for a greater amount of positive reinforcement from other users.

**Negative indications.** Due to of the nature of Twitter, a negative indication of dislike for a tweet can only be seen through a direct reply that expresses negative feelings towards the tweet. Only one participant highlighted this; however, I believe the nature of the negativity in the reply as well as the reactions from the participant makes it a noteworthy occurrence to look at in this study. This example was given from Morgan, when describing a controversial reply that she received from another user:
I did have one experience that was pretty intense over Twitter. And usually I won’t get into debates with people about stuff that’s going on or just like anything that they post because when people get in fights on [social media] I just think it’s silly. So I corrected this guy who posted something grammatically incorrect and he got really defensive and was saying all this weird stuff and I was just kind of like, ok I’m sorry I wasn’t trying to get into anything. And I didn’t reply for like 3 hours and then he sent another tweet that was like “I will rape all the women in your family and make you watch.” And that was really upsetting to me because he lived [a town away] and so it was like not just some random person, it was a real person’s account with a real location and I just thought it was a really stupid thing to say. [...] It kind of felt like it just took it off of just being a social media thing. It had to do with women who are actually in my life and it had to do with somebody who is in the environment and they could actually do it, and so it felt more personal than I usually allow Twitter to be.

This type of response from the user in Morgan’s example is referred to as “flaming, or the sending of virulent insults via email, [and] is one of the first (see Keilser, Siegal, & McGuire, 1984) and most enduring (e.g., Lea et al. 1992; Thompsen, 1996) problematics in computer-mediated communication (CMC) research” (Vrooman, 2001, p. 33). Studies looking at “cyberspace machismo” (Thompsen, 1996, p. 306), online harassment, and virtual rape are vast, and could aid in the understanding in the users motivation for such aggression (Balsamo, 1995; Beaubien, 1996; Brail, 1993; Lee, 1996; Hall, 1996; Rheingold, 1993; Spender, 1995; Truong, 1993; We, 1993). However, for the purposes of this study, it is more important to focus on Morgan’s feelings towards the interaction. Because of the negative and aggressive nature of the reply that Morgan received, she was able to clearly decipher that the information that she shared with the other user was not received in the way that she
had intended it to be perceived. This could be seen when Morgan replied a second
time, stating that she “wasn’t trying to get into anything.”

While this is an extreme type of negative response observed in this study,
other participants noted a more subtle indication of negativity seen on Twitter,
which is a general lack of response. Participants who discussed the lack of response
from other users specified it as occurring when they had specifically reached out to
one or more users and did not receive any sort of reply. For example, Ellie stated,

I don’t really get [upset] if people don’t favorite my stuff but like, if it’s
really funny and it’s an inside joke with a friend, I’d be kind of pissed if
they don’t re-tweet it, if they were laughing at it. [...] Just because, if I
take the time out of my day to like try and share a moment with
someone, if they don’t even acknowledge it, it’s kind of upsetting. If
you reach out to someone and they don’t reach back, it’s kind of a sad
experience.

This quote illustrates how Ellie interprets the lack of response from a tweet directed
at a specific individual as a negative indication.

**Reactions to observed perceptions of the audience.** Just as the observed
perceptions of the audience can be seen to represent Mead’s concept of the “Me,” the
reactions that participants discussed in this study can be seen to represent the
concept of the “I.” As previously explained, Mead (1934) describes the “I” as ones
reaction to the perception that one creates, based on how they think others see
them. So, in this study, the “I” can be seen as participants reactions to the assumed
perceptions that they create, based on their followers or those who they view as
their audience. Three types of reactions were seen in this study. These three types of
reactions are feelings of regret, an attempt to adjust perceptions, and indifference.
When analyzing these reactions, one can see that participants in this study use these tactics when reacting to negative responses, or lack of responses from other users. At the same time, these reactions should not necessarily be viewed as being mutually exclusive, but instead should be seen as having potential to be used singularly, cooperatively, or consecutively.

**Feelings of regret.** When commenting on the topic of regret, users described specific situations that influenced them to regret posting a tweet. The three situations described by participants that influenced the feeling of regret were when they made grammar mistakes, when they tweeted under the influence of alcohol, and when they caused conflict. When describing what would influence her to delete a tweet, Neddie stated, “Probably people’s perceptions of it. Or if it just seemed foolish. Maybe if it was drinking the night before, or something.” One can see here that Neddie was consciously aware of thinking about her audience and their perception of her identity, which she believed was compromised or distorted due to the influence of alcohol. Jimmy also shared a similar idea, when stating,

Sometimes I will go on drunk rants, like, you know, speaking my mind and then I look at it the next day and I’m just like, wow. I don’t do that a lot, but there are times that people will just text me and be like, “Dude you’re blowing up my Twitter feed right now.”

In this case, Jimmy gave an example of receiving direct communication regarding others perceptions of his actions, and then his reaction to those perceptions, through feelings of regret.
Spelling mistakes and conflict situations were also noted by participants as influencing the feeling of regret. For example, Rurik stated,

I’ll regret when I’m arguing about something and I spell something wrong and I just look like an idiot. That’s most of the time when I’ll regret something, I don’t know, I’ll regret arguing with people, like after the fact. I’ll be like, well that was stupid. This is Twitter.

Ellie also noted on the influence that spelling mistakes have on her feelings of regret regarding a particular tweet.

I’ve definitely regretted tweets because I’ve misspelled words, absolutely. Or if I find grammatical errors and stuff like that. That’s probably my biggest reason why I would regret posting a tweet. Umm, or if it just really doesn’t make any sense. Or if it’s something again, like something too personal that I like, in the moment you think it’s something you want to share with someone but however many hours later you’re like wow that was really personal, I actually don’t want to talk to people about that.

Rurik and Ellie note the impact that mistakes can have on the identity that they are attempting to portray to their followers. This realization of the impact and the feeling of regret based on that give an illustration of Mead’s (1934) concept of the “I” and the “Me.” The tweet that they later regret can be seen as a representation of their social self (the “Me”) and their feelings of regret can be seen as a reaction to their social self (the “I”).

**Attempt to adjust perceptions.** Another reaction noted by participants in this study is an attempt to adjust their audience’s perception of them after either receiving a negative reaction, or a lack of positive reinforcement. One example was seen when Morgan explained her reaction to the user that reacted negatively and aggressively to her, in the previously explained instance:
When that situation happened I re-tweeted what he said so that other people could see it and hopefully be as shocked as I was. And some people really were, but I also had a friend of mine who I texted me, off of Twitter obviously, and he said maybe that probably wasn’t the best idea because you could be encouraging him in a way that he doesn’t understand. So I think I actually ended up deleting that tweet, but I don’t regret tweeting it initially I guess. But I also realized that I should take that off. It doesn’t really reflect anything about me, except that I wanted other people to see it.

While Morgan does not see this users tweet to reflect anything about her, besides the fact that she wanted other people to see it, she chose to take it down because of the influence that it would have on the user from whom the tweet originally came. While Morgan may not have used this tactic as an attempt to adjust perceptions of herself, she was attempting to adjust perceptions of the general situation.

Other users noted an attempt to directly adjust other’s perceptions of them, by choosing to delete tweets because they were not well received. For example, Rosanne stated,

I’ve definitely deleted some tweets because I just, I mean, maybe regret is not the right word exactly. I just thought that was probably crossing the line a little bit, or like, that one didn’t seem to be like well received and it feels awkward or something.

Sam also mentioned this same idea of regret for “crossing the line,” when describing if he ever regretted posting a tweet. He stated,

Maybe, but if I have I’ve just deleted it. Like maybe I said something that wasn’t funny or maybe it was mean, like I was picking on someone so they got pissed, so I’ll delete that. If it’s not funny, it’s not worth it.

Here one can see that humor plays a role in Sam’s reaction to other’s perceptions of the information that he shares. If his audience does not see the information he is
sharing as humorous and therefore does not react in a way that positively reinforces the humor, then Sam assesses the level of humor and also how it influenced another individual's emotions, and therefore chooses to delete the tweet.

**Indifference.** While most participants noted deleting a tweet at least once before, many also explained that there were times when they were not worried about others perceptions, and even upon realization of the perception that the tweet created for others, chose to look past it. For example, Neddie stated,

I had watched a movie, it was Jesse and Celeste Forever. So I tweeted about it, I was like “oh man sometimes films have the ability to change your life,” and I just, I reread that and I was like, yeah that sounds really lame and [my sister] reread it too and she was like, yeah that does sound really lame. But I didn’t delete it because I was like, uhh whatever people think about me, I try to not care that much. So I didn’t delete it. Even thought I though it was a pretty lame thing to say.

Even though Neddie created an imagined perception of the way that the information that she presented looked for her audience, and even with that perception being reinforced by her sister, she made the conscious decision to accept that imagined perception and chose to keep the tweet on her profile.

This theme shows that participants in this study recognized that, not only was the information being shared on their Twitter account being presented to an audience, but also the idea that the information that they presented could be accepted or rejected by the audience. Furthermore, the participants identified specific reactions that they would have based on positive or negative indications
from the audience. Understanding aspects of the audience, as well as the reactions from participants can give insight into identity portrayal on Twitter.

**Purpose of Twitter as a Means to Stay Updated and/or Update Others**

The third theme found in this study emphasizes how Twitter is widely utilized by users as a medium to stay updated on information that they are interested in, as well as to update others on information that they choose to share. This theme will present information given by the participants that exemplifies this idea. Within this theme, there will be two main subthemes, with three categories in each. The two subthemes are: purpose of Twitter as a means to stay updated, and purpose of Twitter as a means to update others.

Both of the subthemes will be further categorized as presenting or seeking information under the corporate, celebrity, or ‘ordinary’ classification, which are classifications developed by Page (2012) as introduced in the literature review. Each of these classifications will be used to categorize the type of information that the participants expressed feelings of interest in staying updated on or updating others about.

**Purpose of Twitter as a Means to Stay Updated.** Many participants expressed the idea that Twitter is a useful medium to stay updated on corporate (news, politics, or sports), celebrity (specific actors, musicians, politicians, or athletes), or ‘ordinary’ (friends or acquaintances) information. Due to the asymmetric nature of Twitter (O’Reilly, 2009), users are able to easily follow public profiles that provide one, if not more, of these types of information. This subtheme
will present information given from participants that reflect this idea. The categories under this subtheme have been listed in order of prominence, based on interview data.

**Ordinary.** A seemingly obvious purpose of Twitter is to fulfill the desire to keep in contact with friends or acquaintances that the users either know personally, or through another friend or user. Most of the participants stated that the majority of the accounts that they follow fall under the category of ‘ordinary’ users. When asked why she follows these types of users the most, Mei stated, “Well I follow my friends because a lot of people are just abandoning Facebook, so it’s kind of just another way to stay connected.” When answering the same question, Kristy stated, “They’re my friends, so I like to see what my friends are up to.” Jolee supported this idea when she stated the following:

> Because I kind of want to stay updated on their lives, and sometimes, you know, they post things that I want to repost. I have relationships with them, so I want to stay updated and want to know what they’re doing.

These are just a few examples that show the motivational purpose of Twitter as being a tool to stay updated on other user’s lives.

Some participants made comparative comments, favoring the use of Twitter as a means to stay updated on their friends lives over using it to stay updated on celebrity or corporate accounts. An example of this was seen when Walter was asked why he chooses to follow ‘ordinary’ accounts the most. Walter replied by stating, “I would rather know what my friends are doing than know what celebrities
are doing. Even though I do follow them a little bit.” So, while Walter does have a slight interest in following the updates given by celebrities, when comparing the two purposes, he favors the purpose of following and being updated about his friend’s lives. This idea was also shown when Rosanne answered the same question; however, she discussed the technological affordances of Twitter that allow her to have the updates from her friends more readily available than those from corporate or celebrity accounts. Rosanne stated, “I made a list of my favorite profiles with all my actual real-life friends, and I like looking at what they have to say, more so than celebrities and stuff.” Due to Twitter’s allowance for users to create ‘favorite’ lists, users are able to put some user’s tweets at a higher priority than those from others.

**Corporate.** During Twitter’s existence, it has become an increasingly popular medium for users to seek news-related information (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). Many participants in this study reflected this idea. When asked what motivated her to get a Twitter account Kristy stated,

> I also like that it’s more informative. So if I wanted to see what was happening around the world, I could easily see, you know, whatever anyone is updating their Twitter feed to. Like CNN or BBC, regardless of the source, it’s always there.

Morgan also expressed similar feelings by stating, “I use Twitter for quick news a lot, and also just to give me an idea of what’s going on outside of the [local] world that I live in. To keep my attention more broad.” Each of these participants expressed a purposeful use of Twitter as a resource for news updates.
The quick nature of Twitter, as expressed by Morgan in the previous quote, is a large contributing factor to Twitter’s ability as a news source. After explaining a personal story regarding the quick availability of Twitter to update users during the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings, Rurik stated:

It's cool that we live in a time where we can get news in like two minutes of it happening. If not, everyone would have had to wait until tomorrow or something like that to read in the newspaper that it happened, or to tune into the morning news. And I think it's cool that 3,000 miles away this thing was happening, but I was getting live updates from the Boston Police Department as soon as it was happening.

Many participants mirrored this idea, and even compared the speed of information on Twitter to that of other media sources. For example, Mei stated:

To be honest, it's a pretty good for news. Especially last night with the Boston bombings; I got home from the bar last night, checked my Twitter and it's like, CNN is tweeting about it and I turned on cable and no one was covering it on TV, yet we were getting a live stream of updates.

While participants noted using Twitter as a means for news updates, a few of them commented on the hesitation to fully accept information as complete truth. Following the previous comment, Mei stated:

I follow the corporate stuff because they use it, and it's a useful place for information. And like yeah, not everything you see on the Internet is true, so I don't take everything that is tweeted for fact, but when you have a source like CNN that's constantly tweeting about something, you know it's going to be pretty reliable.

While this may not have been the main purpose of Twitter for these participants, the above quotations show an interest in Twitter as a means for updating themselves on current news and events. Due to the technological affordances provided by Twitter
to favorite and re-tweet and due to the availability of this type of information, Twitter users have the opportunity to see this type of information and spread it further, thus expanding the audience. Because of this, the interest that participants in this study expressed regarding the desire to stay updated on corporate information can be seen as a strategy to develop and portray their online identity on Twitter.

**Celebrity.** While this category was less prevalent than others, there were some users who expressed motivation to participate in Twitter in order to keep up on celebrity information. The types of celebrity information that was mentioned in this study were specific actors, musicians, politicians, or athletes. While this category is similar to the corporate category, the difference is that it focuses on users who mentioned using Twitter to keep up with singular individuals, instead of those combined under a corporate identification.

Neddie expressed this idea when she stated, “[…] some of the musicians that I enjoy I follow just because they post cool stuff or tour dates.” She obviously focuses on specific artists that she is interested in, in order to receive information such as tour dates. This sentiment was mirrored by Agneta when she stated, “I like to follow music because […] they tweet songs that you want to hear and like stuff about concerts or whatever. So it’s easier to keep up with what they’re doing.” These two participants see Twitter as a tool to keep up with music and specific musicians that they currently enjoy.
Some participants expressed a desire to use Twitter not only to stay informed about the celebrities work, but also just as a form of entertainment. Joan explained Twitter as a way to have a deeper insight into celebrity personalities. When asked what motivates her to continue to actively use her Twitter account, she replied, “Just to keep up with music [and] what’s coming out. Some of them have really interesting personalities that come out on their Twitter, which is entertaining to read.” Joan therefore utilizes Twitter as a medium to receive insight into a person’s life that she most likely would not normally be able to access. As explained by Page (2012):

The asymmetric follow (O’Reilly, 2009) influences the process of self-branding and micro-celebrity, whereby the size of a follower list is taken as a sign of status and one-to-many updates can be broadcast to an audience of potentially millions, without necessarily requiring that the updater receive updates from the audience in return (p. 183).

The asymmetric nature of Twitter can aid in the understanding of this desire to have a deeper insight into the personalities of these celebrities that Joan expressed above. Rosanne shared this idea when she stated the following:

Yeah a lot of celebrity accounts that I pay more attention to are like... there are a lot of comedy accounts actually. I guess I think those are really entertaining. And then there are a lot of celebrity accounts that I like to keep up with because I think they’re interesting. And then there are the ones that I unfollow because they’re the Kardashians and they’re annoying [laughs].

Rosanne’s desire to follow celebrity accounts seems to stem from a purpose of entertainment. She describes the celebrities that she follows as “interesting,” which one could hypothesize as mirroring the ideas seen in Joan’s quotation; that users
have the ability to see the personalities of certain individuals that normally would not be accessible. Furthermore, when celebrity accounts are not fulfilling this desire for entertainment, Rosanne makes the conscious decision to unfollow them.

One user described her motivation to follow celebrities as a way to receive further information about other aspects of pop-culture. When Jenda was asked why she chose to follow celebrity users the most, she replied:

Because the celebrities usually tell me what’s out there. So like, oh look at this event, or look at this art, or look at this great person doing this great thing. So usually I like people who kind of navigate through pop-culture.

Jenda illustrates how she uses the celebrities as a tool to stay informed about aspects of pop-culture that she might not otherwise have access to. Unlike the previous quotations in this section, this shows a focus on the instructive use of celebrity accounts, instead of just as a way to stay informed on their own music and personalities.

These three categories within this subtheme of Twitter as a means to stay updated demonstrate many different motivations that users may have when participating in Twitter. While these motivations can be seen as operating in the corporate, celebrity, or ‘ordinary’ categories, it can also be observed that many participants utilize Twitter as a mixture of the three. Although some users, as shown above, expressed a preference for the type of updates that they received, there were very few participants who expressed complete devotion for just one type
of information updates. Therefore, one can see these categories as not being mutually exclusive, but instead co-existing amongst each other.

**Purpose of Twitter as a Means to Update Others.** Many Twitter users do not only go on Twitter to view what other users are saying, but instead choose to participate in the surrounding discourse. This subtheme demonstrates ways in which users utilize Twitter as a means to update others. These updates also fit into the previously discussed categories: corporate, celebrity, and ‘ordinary’. As it can be inferred, the ‘ordinary’ category shows participant use of Twitter to update others on their own lives, or on the lives of other ‘ordinary’ users. The corporate category demonstrates user desire to relate news or current events to their list of followers. Lastly, the celebrity category shows participant use of Twitter as a means to update others on information regarding specific celebrities. Similar to the previous section, the categories in this subtheme have been listed in order of prominence, based on information gathered from the participants.

**Ordinary.** Many participants in this study mentioned utilizing Twitter as a tool to express their own thoughts and opinions. Some of these thoughts and opinions could be placed in the ‘ordinary’ category of this sub-theme. Within this category, participants expressed ideas relating to tweets or information that provided updates about their own lives.

On Twitter, each user has a headline, which is located on their main profile page. This headline provides a chance for users to provide whatever information they want others to know about them within 140 characters. When describing her
reasoning behind the specific information in her headline, Kristy stated the following:

So people can kind of see what I like to do, what I’m about, and it also ties in with that I’m a merchandising student. I like to create and style. And I actually do get followers from, like, boutiques. I think I’ve had a few stylists follow me. But they’re, like, underground. They’re not big names. But I think they see that I’m a student and they see my major and maybe that influences them to follow me.

Walter shared similar ideas when explaining the reasoning behind the information on his headline when he stated, “Just kind of telling everyone where my life is right now.” These two users utilize the headline area to update users and inform them about their own lives.

The use of Twitter to update others about one’s life is not only prevalent in the headline. Many users explained that they are motivated to actively use their account in order to update others about their lives. When explaining the topics that she normally tweets about, Kristy stated, “I tweet about a lot of different topics. So, mostly music and movies, what I’m doing that night, how my classes are going. Yeah, I mean, it’s endless I would say.” While the beginning of this quotation alludes to Kristy updating others about corporate information, the rest of the quotation explains her use of Twitter to inform others about events or circumstances within her own life. When explaining the type of information that she tweets about the most, Agneta stated, “I tweet about my dog, and I tweet about going out, and I tweet about the news, some feministy things. Umm, I tweet just like, the banalities of my day.” Again, although Agneta explains some information that
would fall in the corporate category, one can see that majority of the information that she tweets about is a direct reflection of the happenings within her life.

Some users expressed feelings of excitement when responses about their personal lives were well received. Specifically, when explaining a time when he was proud of a tweet, Jimmy described responses that he received when he tweeted about being accepted into a University. When asked what made him proud of this particular tweet, Jimmy stated the following:

Just that I’d gotten accepted into [the University]. And I had a lot of friends that were here already, and they were Twitter users, and they were pretty stoked. So their responses were welcoming.

Here one can see that Jimmy’s use of Twitter as a tool to update others about his personal life was well received, which resulted in the feeling of pride for that tweet.

**Corporate.** As previously stated, Twitter has become an increasingly popular site for users to receive information about news or current events (Bruns & Burgess, 2012). In addition to this idea, participants in this study have expressed ideas of wanting to inform their followers about news or current events that they have found out about. Whether this is done through re-tweeting others’ tweets or through creating their own tweets, participants in this study presented information that showed a desire to relate news to other users.

When asked to describe her followers, Morgan stated the following:

I have a weird mix of people who follow me. I have some very informed and active followers on the East Coast and in California, and so I like to be involved [and] to know what they are doing. But then I also have some followers from the [local] community who I don’t
consider to be that informed, and so sometimes I'll re-tweet things that I think those people need to know. It's like an educational tool.

One can see from this quote that Morgan utilizes Twitter as a way to keep others informed on the happenings in the world around them. Morgan elaborated on this idea when she explained the possible conflict that may arise when expressing information that she believed other people should know:

So if we're talking about something that I consider to be controversial, like political beliefs and affiliations, umm, I don't know. I'm very liberal, more than most people know. For me it's like, if you're on Twitter and choosing to listen to the things other people have to say then you're choosing to listen to things that other people have to say. So if you don't want to hear it, you don't have to follow that person. You don't have to be on there. So it's following along the boarder of what people might care about and what I think they should care about and they can choose to follow me based on those things.

These two quotations from Morgan show a yearning to be an informative facilitator for news and current events. This idea was also expressed by other participants but with a less facilitative tone. Agneta stated:

Other times I'm just bored and I'm like hmm I wish I had something to tweet. So I'm like, is there some news that I want to tweet about or some song that I'm obsessed with right now that I want to tweet?

While Agneta seems to approach this information sharing in a less educational way than Morgan, one can see that she is consciously approaches the desire to tweet with news in mind.

As introduced by in the literature review, Zappavigna (2011) explains the idea of hashtags, or Twitter, as “offer[ing] a medium for expressing personal evaluation to a large body of listeners with which one can affiliate ambienly,” (p.
16). This idea was expressed by Tony, when explaining his reasoning for utilizing a particular hashtag that related to a sporting event. He stated that he chose to use the hashtag, “#DUNKS because it was just funny and #FGCU [Florida Gulf Coast University] was so that people looking at that hashtag [would see it], because it was super trending at that time, so I wanted people who looked that up to see it.” Tony utilized the hashtag in order to broaden his intended audience, and share his opinion on the corporate news relating to the basketball game. He also stated, “I was watching a basketball game and it was a team that I was very passionate about and I wanted everyone to know about it.” This quote shows Tony’s interest in expressing his opinion to a broad audience relating to this event. Mei also commented on the purpose of hashtags, when she stated the following:

Well hashtags are kind of used to group things together. So if you’re tweeting about a national event, like a shooting or something like that, if you hashtag it, other people might be able to see it, if it’s something inspirational or something like that.

Similar to Tony’s thoughts above, Mei remarks on the use of hashtags as a tool to broadcast information.

While Mei and Tony chose to utilize hashtags for the purpose of broadcasting information, many participants chose to utilize hashtags for a different purpose. One of these purposes was for humor. For example, Rurik stated,

I mean sometimes if it’s like something that’s actually trending and big and I want to get it seen then I’ll use it, but for the most part I don’t know how many people actually use the trending topics and that doesn’t really seem like it’s my audience, I guess. I tweet for the people who follow me mostly, and hashtags are just kind of like a,
haha that was a funny hashtag, or something like that. They’re like ironic.

This idea was also expressed by Rosanne, when answering a question asking how often she uses hashtags:

Not a whole lot. I definitely use them from time to time. I think the way that I use them is not so much like, oh I want to hashtag this so that other people click on that hashtag and see it, I do more, I guess, ironic hashtags that no one else would write. Like, I’ve seen people, if they’re talking about being at the beach and they’ll hashtag “ocean”, and you can tell that they’re doing it so that people see the tweet. So I more do it out of irony I guess.

From these two examples, one can see that the purpose of hashtags, as defined by users, may go against the intended purpose of hashtags, as defined by the creators of Twitter. This idea will be further explored in the discussion chapter, when information regarding identity gaps is presented.

**Celebrity.** There was no data collected to support the celebrity category within this subtheme. While many participants mentioned tweeting about music or sports, these mentions were broad and generalized, and therefore fell into the corporate category. While this category was not mentioned within this study it is still useful to note the significance of this, and to question how this lack of data speaks to the sharing of information related to specific celebrities. Just because of this lack of data, one cannot conclude that celebrities are not mentioned on Twitter; however, it can be inferred that within this specific pool of participants, celebrity updates were not as important to comment on as the other categories, and therefore were not as present within their Twitter-sphere.
The theme of the Purpose of Twitter as a Means to Stay Updated and/or Update Others can be useful insight into the strategies that Twitter users utilize when attempting to develop and portray their online identity on Twitter. This is due to the Twitter user’s motivation when approaching Twitter, and therefore building their online identity. Having a specific purpose for Twitter in mind will influence the information that users seek and disclose. Furthermore, the purposes that users create when seeking and disclosing information can influence the specific strategies that users choose when performing on Twitter.

**Comparison of Other Social Networks**

The forth and final theme that came from the data depicts how the majority of participants brought up other social networking websites when speaking about Twitter. Prompts for the discussion of other social networks were not offered, which distinguished this comparison or discussion of other social networks as being a natural connection made by the participants. This natural connection to other social networks when on the topic of Twitter can be seen as a strategy for participants because of its influence on the way that participants choose to interact and perform on Twitter. Due to their conscious awareness of Twitter’s connection to other social networks, participants in this study discussed the influence that other social networks have on what they chose to tweet.

**Difference in Twitter design.** Many participants noted that the design of Twitter allows for more comfort when posting tweets or interacting with other users. Most of these comments from participants allude to this comfort being due to
the quick nature of Twitter. When explaining her motivation to use Twitter, Kristy stated the following:

I also think that I can relate more to people on my Twitter feed than I can on Facebook and it’s kind of weird but I don’t feel as judged to update my Twitter as I do on Facebook because people aren’t as obligated to respond to it. They can read it and then move on. But with Facebook, it seems like a lot of people are always commenting on something, and you don’t want to get the negative feedback. I feel like on Twitter you don’t receive that.

From this statement, it appears that Kristy feels more comfortable posting on Twitter than she does on Facebook, because of the design and the technological affordances on Twitter. Other participants also noted the quick nature of Twitter, as well. Walter stated that Twitter is “a faster way to keep up with what’s going on […] I like that it’s a quick read instead of Facebook with all the other stuff.” Walter indicated that because of the design of Twitter, it is a quicker and more time efficient form of social networking. Taking this idea further, Walter explained that he does not appreciate when other users go against this “norm” of quick, less conversational information sharing.

That’s something that’s interesting too, when people have full conversations on Twitter, because it doesn’t seem like that would be an actual media outlet to have a full conversation. Sometimes I get annoyed when people are having big conversations on it.

Here, it appears that Walter not only appreciates the quick nature of Twitter, but he also experiences feelings of frustration when users do not utilize Twitter in the quick manner that he sees it as allowing. This is most likely because if a user follows two or more users who are conversing on Twitter, these tweets will show up on that
user’s news feed, preventing him or her from being able to quickly reach other tweets, thus deterring the user from enjoying the quick nature of Twitter.

This quick nature of Twitter may be attributed to the 140-character allowance. Because of the fact that Twitter users are forced to produce a tweet within 140 characters, not only does this provide for a faster read for other users but according to Ellie, it also influences the actual information that is shared:

I just for some reason feel like what people post on Twitter is very different than what they post on Facebook. Just because you only have 140 characters to get your point out, so you’ve really need to say something important in those 140 characters. You have to do more with less.

Here, one can see that the character allowance has the potential to have an influence on the information that users choose to share. This difference in the type of information shared due to the design of Twitter has been accepted as a positive aspect by some users. Kristy stated,

I don’t really like the interface of Facebook anymore. I don’t think that it’s as beneficial to anyone because it’s just so open and so with Twitter I like the fact that, even though mine isn’t private right now, I can have the option of a private setting and I also like that it’s more informative.

Therefore, one can see that many of the Twitter users in this study prefer the design of Twitter over the design of other social networking websites, due to its allowance for a quick read and its informative nature.

**Difference in audience.** Participants in this study noted a difference in the type of audience that is present on Twitter, which attributed to the type of
information that participants chose to share. When asked what motivated her to get a Twitter account initially, Rosanne stated,

I didn’t really use it too much initially but then I started exploring more with it and it was nice because now that all of my adult family members and co-workers and things like that are on Facebook, Twitter is more free to post whatever, like inappropriate things [laughs].

This difference in audience was mentioned as influencing not only the type of information that the participants choose to present, but also a comparative difference between Twitter and other social networking websites related to the frequency with which this information was presented. Neddie shared this idea when stating,

I choose to post on Twitter more than I do on Facebook because the number of people reading my posts on Twitter is limited compared to the amount of people on Facebook. I think that I keep more protection on my Facebook feed for that very reason. I could delete people on Facebook but it just seems like a lot of work.

From the two quotes above, one can see that the participants feel more comfortable posting on Twitter because of the limited audience that they mentioned.

When asked about what motivates her to keep actively using her Twitter account, Agneta further supported this idea by alluding to the anonymity of Twitter:

Umm I would say that, like, with Facebook lots of people see everything you put on there. With Twitter I feel like less people see it and, like, the people that follow me on Twitter are my close friends or people I don’t know at all so it’s like, I don’t care what they see. So it’s more anonymous than Facebook and it’s really simple.

Even with a Twitter account that is public, Agneta still feels as though Twitter is more anonymous than Facebook. This feeling of anonymity on Twitter may be
attributed to the typical users that are seen on Twitter. When describing the comfort to post a wider range of information, Rosanne stated,

I don’t care if [my Twitter followers] see me post something about smoking weed or something like that [...]. You can do that more so on Twitter than on like Facebook, because Facebook has become mixed company.

These statements demonstrate how participants feel there is a difference in the type of information that they can share, due to the audience with which they are sharing this information.

**Connection with other social networks.** A new trend in social networking is the connection of different social networking websites to each other. For example, if a user posted a picture onto the popular social networking website, Instagram, he or she is given the option to further share this picture on other social networking websites, such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and Flickr. Participants in this study have noted some of the positive and negative aspects of this affordance. For example, Jolee stated,

Honestly, I’ll go through phases where I forget to post on [Twitter], but my Instagram is linked to it, so I always click “post to Twitter” on my Instagram. [So it's] mostly my photography, because I link Twitter to my Instagram.

The ability for Jolee to connect her Instagram to her Twitter allows her to further expand her audience for her photography.

While most of the discourse surrounding the ability to connect different forms of social networking to each other was relatively positive, Jenda presented a
situation that showed an example of a negative result from this allowance. When asked if she ever regretted posting a tweet, Jenda stated:

It was a tricky situation. Basically, I was social media coordinator for a restaurant, and I had the account under my email address too, and I had it hooked up with Facebook, and it posted something I had said [on my Twitter] onto the restaurant’s Facebook page. I put, “drop it low” or something like that. And it went into the [restaurant’s] page. So I regretted that because we got complaints and then you know I get reprimanded for that. And hell, it’s just a restaurant, but if that’s Disney or if that’s any other company like Adidas or Nike and you see someone be like “drop it low,” what does that mean? Why are they putting that up there? You know? It’s so out of the norm.

Although this does not seem to be a typical occurrence, one can see that the technological affordances to connect Twitter to other social networking websites provided for a negative incident for Jenda. While this occurrence cannot be blamed solely on Twitter’s allowance of this connection, one can see that without careful supervision, problems have the potential to arise.

Due to the technological affordances provided by social networking websites, users are able to have their social networking forums interact with each other. As presented above, participants in this study not only recognized this, but also discussed the negative and positive aspects that come along with that connection. Furthermore, one can see that the understanding of this ability to connect can lead to a shifting in one’s approach when presenting online identity on Twitter.

The four themes discussed in this chapter were presented to answer the first research question, describing the strategies that Twitter users utilize in order to develop and portray their online identity on Twitter. First, participants explained a
desire and attempt to represent themselves in a specific manner. Second, data collected showed an acknowledgment of and an attempt to positively relate to their audience, as well as specific strategies used in order to do so. The third strategy showed the purpose of Twitter as a means to stay updated or to update others about corporate, celebrity, or ‘ordinary’ information. Lastly, participants recognized that there are existing similarities and differences between Twitter and other social networking websites, and along with these similarities and differences comes the technological affordance to connect different social networking mediums to each other. By understanding and analyzing these four strategies, one is able to gain insight into aspects of online identity development and portrayal on Twitter.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

While the previous chapter described the different strategies research participants discusses as ways they portray their online identities, this chapter has been designed to answer the second research question, which states the following: How can these strategies of identity development and portrayal utilized on Twitter be understood as operating within the personal, the enactment, the relationship, and the communal frames? This chapter will exemplify how the previously presented strategies can be seen as operating within each of the four frames of the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI).

Personal Frame

As previously explained in the literature review, “personal identity is an individual’s self-concepts or self images, [and] [...] it exists at the individual level of analysis as a characteristic of individuals” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 266). Within the context of Twitter, one can see many aspects as operating within this category. In this study specifically, the themes or strategies that were found to best fit into this frame were as follows: Representation of the Self, Acknowledgment of the Audience, and aspects within Purpose of Twitter as a Means to Stay Updated and/or Update Others. The connection of these strategies will be presented cooperatively in this section.

Research participants described their attempt to portray identity on Twitter in a specific manner, including the utilization of specific strategies to do so. This idea can be seen to fit into the personal frame, due to the concentration of the
participants on their personal identity. Participants recognized the technological implications of presenting identity online and noted aspects of Twitter, such as word allowance, as impacting how or if they chose to disclose certain information. Also, participants identified a differentiation between how they believed the audience perceived their identity and how they meant for their identity to be perceived.

Material presented from Morgan, Rosanne, Jolee, and Neddie can be used to better understand how the personal frame was reflected in the data. For example, when Rosanne explained her desire to “represent [herself] in the right way,” one can infer that she views her Twitter account as “exist[ing] at the individual level of analysis as a characteristic of” herself (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 266). Another example can be seen when looking at information received from participants regarding the construction of their personal headline. Jolee and Neddie both described the purpose of providing a headline as being a way to express who they are; therefore, one can understand the headline as being the first broadcast of a Twitter user’s personal identity. The headline on each Twitter user’s account can be used to provide a preview into the individual’s personal identity for other users. Even the lack of a headline can clue other users into that user’s self-concept. The fact that participants in this study discussed the headline and their Twitter in general as a reflection of themselves, one can see this data as operating within the personal frame.
This section of the analysis chapter also explored two different strategies that participants described when attempting to express their identity in a specific way. These strategies were labeled as an attempt to relate and topic avoidance. Participants chose to attempt to relate and to avoid certain topics in order to create the smallest amount of metaphorical distance between themselves and their audience. The use of these strategies can be viewed as an attempt to portray their self-concept to their audience in a specific way. In doing this, one can see that participants in this study not only had an understanding of their self-concept within their online identity, but they were also interested in creating the least amount of distinction between how they view their identity and how they want others to view their identity. From a communication perspective, one can see that the participants understood and were conscious of their choice in how their identity was presented. Through this consciousness, participants were aware that they were actually creating aspects of their personal identity for their audience to see.

This realization of personal identity presentation to an audience also shows how participant description of their acknowledgment of the audience can be seen to operate within the personal frame. Participants in this study recognized the fact that, when using Twitter, they are presenting information on Twitter to a particular audience. Furthermore, many participants distinguished between how they meant for information to be perceived and the way that it was actually perceived by their audience. This acknowledgment and information collected from interviews regarding this distinction can be seen as indications of their self-concept or self-
image. For example, one can see this distinction exemplified in Kristy’s comment concerning times when she thought she created a good tweet, followed by the statement, “or at least to me, I think it’s pretty good,” or Sam’s statement, “[...] I feel like I’m pretty witty, but I don’t know if others agree.” These users may view the material they are sharing in a certain light; however, they realize that others may interpret these reflections of their identity differently. It is through this distinction that one can see this as operating within the personal frame. Although users may attempt to portray their personal identity in a certain light, they are also aware that they may not be successful in doing so.

The analysis chapter presented three reactions to this observed perception of the audience, labeled as feelings of regret, attempt to adjust perceptions, and indifference. When participants received either negative reactions or a lack of positive reactions from their audience and they in turn felt as though their identity was not properly presented, many of them engaged in one or more of these three reactions. As previously explained, these should not necessarily be viewed as mutually exclusive reactions, but instead should be viewed as having potential to occur singularly, cooperatively, or consecutively. The engagement of these reactions can be seen as a tactic within the personal frame because of the realization of a negative reaction from the audience to information presented from the participant, followed by an attempt to adjust this perception. In the case of indifference, while the participants are not attempting to adjust perceptions, they still have a
realization that there is a difference between their self-being and the perceptions of their self-being from others.

Now that the role of the audience within the personal frame has been explained, information collected from participants regarding the purpose of Twitter will be explored within the scope of the person frame. Data presented in this study showed participant recognition of Twitter as a medium where information regarding corporate, celebrity, or ‘ordinary’ news can be shared. The information collected regarding participant use of Twitter as a way to update others can be seen to operate within the personal frame, due to the reflection of the information presented on the participant’s personal identity. While corporate or celebrity information may not be directly about the participant, one can see the type of information that the participant chose to present to their audience as being a reflection of their personal values or beliefs.

When choosing to update others on news or events in their personal lives, one can infer that these users are choosing news or events that reflect their self-concept or self-being. Information collected from participants reflects this inference. For example, both Kristy and Agneta explained that many times they choose to tweet about their daily lives. These happenings can be seen as a reflection of their self-concept, because of the fact that they choose to present information about their personal lives along with or instead of other types of information. This conscious choice to present information about their personal lives can be seen to reflect what these participants view as important.
Understanding how aspects of this study operate within the personal frame can give insight into the presentation of identity from the participants in this study. When users present information that reflects their self-concept, other users are able to gain insight into this self-concept, therefore reaching a better understanding of the personal aspects of that user’s identity. Furthermore, by viewing the personal frame as operating amongst the three other frames, one is able to reach a better understanding of a user’s online identity.

**Enactment Frame**

Within CTI, the enactment frame explains identity as being shaped and formed through the sharing of messages. As explained by Hecht (1993), “not all messages are about identity, but identity is part of all messages” (p. 79). Therefore, when individuals on Twitter choose to share information, no matter what this information may be about, their identity is being expressed through these messages. Due to the information-sharing nature of Twitter, this frame can be seen as incredibly significant in this study. Aspects within all four of the themes could be seen to operate within this frame.

Participants in this study described a conscious attempt to present information on Twitter that closely represents them. In doing this, one can see that the sharing of messages in order to represent themselves operates within the enactment frame. The act of presenting information through tweets provides the user’s audience with an idea of that user’s overall identity. Furthermore, if the user is in fact attempting to present information that most closely represents their
identity, which was reflected in this study, then the audience has the opportunity to reach a better understanding of the user’s identity through their tweets.

The strategies presented by participants as a way to represent themselves in a certain way were referred to in the analysis as an attempt to relate and topic avoidance. By utilizing these strategies in order to represent themselves on Twitter in a specific way, participants in this study were presenting information that can be seen to operate within the enactment frame. Viewing this information within the scope of the enactment frame shows that the audience has the opportunity to interpret the user’s identity, based on the sharing of these messages.

Aspects of positive and negative indications when acknowledging the audience can be seen as operating within the enactment frame. Participants recognized either positive signs from their audience, showing that a tweet was well received, or negative signs, which can be seen from either a negative response or the lack of a response all together. Positive indications of tweets fit into the enactment frame because of the act of the audience either replying to, favoriting, or re-tweeting the individual’s tweet. For example, when Rosanne and Jolee discussed the feeling of pride or positivity that they have when another individual favorites or re-tweets a tweet that they post, one can see that this action not only influences how this tweet has been perceived by others, but also how they feel about their own identity. Because these types of interactions influence the participants to have some sort of emotional reaction, one can see the interaction as influencing their thoughts and perceptions of themselves. Through this communication between the audience
member and the user who produced the tweet, one can see this interaction as operating within the enactment frame.

When looking at negative indications, one can see either negative comments or the lack of enactment as also influencing the individual’s identity. For example, when Morgan explained her experience with another user who engaged in what is known as a “flaming,” she explained that the experience “felt more personal than [she] usually allow[s] Twitter to be.” Morgan’s response to the user as well as her choice to re-tweet what the individual had said and then proceed to delete the re-tweet can be seen to operate within the enactment frame, and can therefore give insight into her online identity. Also, because of Morgan’s emotional reaction to this occurrence, as well as her explanation of it as “[taking] it off of just being a social media thing”, one can see its influence as having an impact on both her online and offline identity.

A negative indication of audience reaction can also come from the lack of engagement. When a user makes the conscious decision to interact with members of the audience and they do not receive any kind of positive indication of a well-received message from the audience, they may see this lack of engagement as a negative indication of the audience’s reaction. For example, when Ellie explained the scenario of attempting to interact with another user and a lack of response from that user, she described the scenario as “kind of sad.” From this, one can see the lack of engagement from the other user as influencing Ellie’s identity. This lack of engagement can be seen as operating within the enactment frame because of the
user expectation of interaction, and the influence that this lack of interaction can have on their identity. The three reactions to the observed perceptions of the audience (feeling of regret, attempt to adjust perceptions, and indifference) can also be seen to operate within the enactment frame because based on the type of reaction that the user engages in, one can see how the negative indication from the audience influenced their identity. If a user chooses to adjust perceptions by deleting a tweet, one can see that the user no longer wanted the tweet to be a portrayal of their identity. By having the option to delete a tweet, the user is able to adjust the portrayal of their online identity.

Participants discussed the purpose of Twitter as being a tool to stay updated or to update others within the corporate, celebrity, or ‘ordinary’ news category. Similar to concepts seen in the explanation of how relating to the audience fits into the personal frame, one can see utilizing Twitter as a means to update others as operating within the enactment frame due to the action of re-tweeting. If a user is consciously making the decision to share a particular message, the user’s audience has an insight into what this user sees as important. When a user chooses to engage in the action of sharing messages in order to update others, one can see this message sharing as representing a part of their identity because of the importance that the user places on this message. For example, when Morgan explained her attempt to use Twitter as a tool to educate her followers, one can see the type of information that Morgan values, based on what type of information she is
attempting to educate her followers on. This shows a reflection of her identity because of the sharing of these professed values.

Participant utilization of the previously discussed trend in social networking of the ability to share information from other social networks to their Twitter audience can be seen to operate within the enactment frame. Participants described multiple connections between Twitter and other social networks. This interaction between social networks can be seen to operate in this frame because of the merging of identities between different social networks. For example, Jolee explained the ability that this function has provided for her to share her photography. By having the ability to share this type of information from other social networking websites, Jolee is able to provide additional insight into her identity, and further build her Twitter identity, specifically.

Participant descriptions of this connection were not all positive. Jenda described a situation when the connection of her social networks negatively influenced her professional life. While fault cannot be put on the social networks for providing this function, one can see the complications that can arise because of the ability to connect different social networks. Jenda’s action of connecting these social networks, as well as her reaction to the mistake that she made, can shed light on her online identity. It is because of this that these actions can be seen to operate within the enactment frame.

Insight into aspects of the enactment frame within the scope of this study can aid in the understanding of how the actions taken by users on Twitter can influence
the portrayal of their identity. Because Twitter is an online medium, the actions that users take are the only forms of insight that others have into their identity. Therefore, understanding actions taken by Twitter users through the scope of the enactment frame is imperative when studying the development and portrayal of online identity on Twitter.

**Relationship Frame**

The relationship frame within CTI explains identity as being “mutually constructed in social interaction” (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). Furthermore, “in this construction identity emerges in relationships and becomes a property of the relationship because it is jointly negotiated” (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). This frame exemplifies the connections that are made between individuals and the identity of the relationship that emerges due to these connections. Each relationship, whether it is professional, romantic, through friendship, or so on, builds and forms its own identity. Within this study, one can see aspects of information from participants as operating within the relationship frame. These aspects are seen in interactions between individuals on Twitter. Online interactions can be seen to create a relational identity, which in turn influences the overall identity of the participants in this study, and subsequently, users of Twitter in general.

In this study participants recognized their Twitter profile as being a reflection of their personal identity; however, participants also recognized their interactions with others on Twitter as having an impact on how their identity may be viewed by others. Interactions with other users can be seen to create a relational
identity, which is then accessible to each users audience. This online relationship also has potential to influence how each user is perceived in their own personal identity, which will be further discussed in the portion of this chapter that covers identity gaps.

In this study, Agneta and Ellie described situations when they felt as though an interaction with another user did not shed a positive light on their identity, which in turn led to feelings of discomfort in that interaction. This can be seen as operating in the relationship frame because of the fact that these participants recognized the impression that their relationship with these other individuals had on the portrayal of their identity. By interacting with others, Twitter users create an identity together, which can be seen to operate in the relationship frame.

The strategies of attempting to relate can also be seen to operate within the relationship frame. Data presented described participants as being conscious of their audience, and because of this, creating tweets that they believed their audience could relate to. While many of these participants or users may not have established an online relationship with all of the individuals in their audience, the attempt to relate can be seen to operate in the relationship frame because of the participants desire to establish relationships by trying to present relevant information. By creating relatable tweets, Twitter users are opening a door to create online relationships, which would in turn create a relational identity between the users. Also, some participants mentioned tagging their friends in tweets that they thought that specific person could relate to. This can be seen to fir into the relationship
frame because of the joint identity that these two users are creating, based on the information that they share with each other.

Participants in this study discussed their reasoning or purpose for utilizing Twitter as a medium where they could stay updated on corporate, celebrity, and ‘ordinary’ information, or to update others on information from the same three categories. The aspects that place this within the relationship frame can be seen when viewing data relating to updating others by either re-tweeting or utilizing the “@” symbol to directly interact with other users. Due to the asymmetrical nature of Twitter, one must question whether features such as re-tweeting or utilizing the “@” symbol to interact with other users either shows aspects of the individual’s personal identity or aspects of a relationship identity between the two users. Information collected in this study shows these features as operating within either or both of these frames. Not only does the act of sharing other user information through re-tweeting or the act of interacting with other users by utilizing the “@” symbol show aspects within an individual’s personal identity, but it also shows aspects of the individual’s identity who is being re-tweeted or interacted with. This is because this interaction reflects not only the person who initiates the interaction, but also the individual who reciprocates the interaction. Furthermore, because of the fact that a user’s followers reflect their own personal identity, a relationship identity can also be formed almost indirectly. For example, when Morgan explained her use of Twitter to educate her followers on her liberal views she stated that she may use the re-tweeting tool or she may share political ideas that she supports, and in doing so,
realizes that her followers are making the conscious decision to hear this type of information from her because of their choice to follow her. When Morgan chooses to share this type of information, a relational connection can be seen between her and the source from which she receives this information. While the asymmetrical nature of Twitter may allow the source of this information to not reciprocate the interaction, a relationship identity can still be seen to form between Morgan and the source.

By utilizing the relationship frame to explore online identity development on Twitter, one can gain insight into the ways that interactions between Twitter users and the subsequent forming of relationships can influence the development and portrayal of one’s online identity on Twitter. The relationship frame seems to be the most complicated and abstract frame to apply within the scope of this study. While the use of this frame seems applicable, the theory does not seem to support the forming of asymmetrical relationships within the relationship frame. This is most likely due to the CTI’s lack of research on online identity. The limitation of this as well as future research that can arise from to the application of CTI to online identity will be further discussed in the concluding chapter of this study.

Communal Frame

Hecht (1993) describes identity as a communal frame as “something held by a group of people which, in turn, bonds the group together” (p. 80). There are many aspects of Twitter that can be seen to operate within the communal frame. For example, Twitter in and of itself can be seen as continuously developing an ongoing
communal identity. Just by the act of participating in Twitter, users are contributing to this communal identity. With that being said, smaller communal identities can also be created on Twitter through the use of hashtags. By participating in the discourse surrounding a particular hashtag, a user is contributing to the communal identity that is created through that hashtag. This section will focus on information received from participants that discusses the use and purpose of hashtags.

As previously explained, when a Twitter user utilizes a certain hashtag, their tweet that includes that hashtag will show up on a separate page with all of the other tweets from users who utilized that same hashtag. So, when a user with a public account chooses to use a hashtag within a tweet, they are choosing to add to the already existing and continuously expanding discourse that is surrounding that hashtag. This leads that user to become a part of the community that that hashtag created. Based on the discourse surrounding that hashtag, an identity for that community emerges. It is because of this emerging identity that the use of hashtags on Twitter can be seen to operate within the communal frame. Within the scope of this study, Tony’s explanation of his reasoning for utilizing a particular hashtag relating to a sporting event can be seen to add to this discussion of Twitter as operating in the communal frame. When Tony explained that he chose to use the hashtags #FGCU [Florida Gulf Coast University] “so that people looking at that hashtag [would see it], because it was super trending at that time, so [he] wanted people who looked that up to see it,” one can see that Tony was interested in adding to the discourse surrounding that hashtag. While there may be many users who do
not utilize hashtags for this purpose, one can see them as always operating within
the communal frame because of the communal identity that they are attributing to
with the use of that hashtag.

The communal frame can be insightful when looking at online identity
development on Twitter because of its reflection on how that user operates within
the greater community of Twitter, as well as within the smaller communities formed
through the use of hashtags. First, a Twitter user is always operating under the
communal identity of Twitter, by choosing to participate in the social network at all.
Also, when utilizing specific hashtags, no matter what the intended purpose, users
are adding to the discourse surrounding that hashtag. It is because of this that the
communal frame can be used to gain insight into an individual’s online identity on
Twitter.

**Identity Gaps**

As briefly explained in the literature review, Hecht and his colleagues
developed the concept of identity gaps after discovering dialectical tensions that
may exist between each of the four frames. As explained by Jung and Hecht (2004),

While not all interpenetrations involve contradictions or
discrepancies (e.g., some may involve frames which enhance each
other), discrepancies or contradictions may be one important way to
conceptualize the interpenetration because the dialectical tension
between contradiction and coexistence of the identity frames can be a
source of the dynamic and fluid nature of identity (p. 267).

The utilization of the concept of identity gaps can be used within this study to better
understand how the themes, as operating within the frames, can be seen to both
contradict and coexist with each other. Identifying the identity gaps within this study can help to reach a deeper understanding of online identity development on Twitter. This section will be set up in terms of the identity gaps that can be seen to exist in this study. These existing identity gaps are as follows: personal-relational, personal-enacted, and enacted-communal.

**Personal-relational.** The most prominent identity gap within this study is between the personal frame and the relationship frame. As described by Jung and Hecht (2004),

the personal-relational identity gap is defined as discrepancies between an individual's personal identity and ascribed relational identity, that is, discrepancies between how an individual views him/herself and his/her perception of how others view him/her (p. 268).

This concept could be seen when participants described a difference between how they viewed their online identity on Twitter and how they assumed others to view their online identity on Twitter.

In the previous section describing the personal frame, participants discussed a differentiation between how they believed the audience to perceive their identity, and how they meant for their identity to be perceived, as well as the influence that interactions with others can have on the expression of their own identity. By understanding and recognizing this distinction, the participants were identifying a dialectical tension between the personal frame and the relationship frame. While a Twitter user may view his or her identity in one way, based on their interactions with others, the user may realize that their identity has the potential to be viewed
by others in a different way. In recognizing this differentiation, users may engage in one or both of the strategies of attempting to relate or topic avoidance when attempting to express their identity in a specific way.

**Personal-enacted.** The personal-enacted identity gap represents a dialectical tension between how an individual views his or her identity, and how he or she expresses this identity. While an individual may consider himself or herself to be one way, his or her actions may be represented differently. Jung and Hecht (2004) explain that “there can be a variety of reasons for this discrepancy, including impression management, dishonesty, shyness, and intimidation” (269). Jung and Hecht (2004) further explain that, regardless of the reasoning behind the discrepancy, the differentiation between the two frames can be seen to create dialectical tensions, which in turn can be defined as creating a personal-enacted identity gap.

The idea of impression management can be seen when focusing on the users attempt to represent him or herself in a particular way. Because Twitter users are not physically in front of the individuals who they are presenting their identity to, one can see the impression of the user’s identity to be more easily manageable. Online users have the option to not disclose information that shows an aspect of their identity that they do not want their audience to see. However, as previously described, participants in this study mentioned times when they regretted a tweet that did not present their identity in the way that they had intended. Therefore, even
with this ability to hide aspects of their identity that they do not want available, participants still had trouble managing impressions from their audience.

This identity gap can be seen when participants described reactions to negative observed perceptions of the audience this can be seen as a realization that how they expressed their identity (enactment frame) may not have matched how they perceive their identity (personal frame). This idea is reinforced by the three previously identified reactions to the observed perceptions of the audience, which were to have feelings of regret, to attempt to adjust perceptions, and to feel or express indifference. By having one or more of these reactions, Twitter users are attempting to adjust the inaccurately expressed conception of their identity.

**Enacted-communal.** The enacted-communal identity gap can be described as a discrepancy between the actions of those within a certain community, and the identity or purpose of that community. This identity gap can be seen to exist within this study due to a discrepancy between the use of hashtags by participants, and the purpose of these hashtags as defined by Twitter. While some participants explained the use of these hashtags as having a purpose to showcase their tweets to a larger audience, many participants explained their use of hashtags as being for other purposes. For example, Rurik and Rosanne expressed ideas relating to the purpose of hashtags as adding an ironic element to their tweets. Instead of utilizing the hashtags for a broadcasting purpose, as they were originally intended for, these users chose to form their own purpose for hashtags. It is because of this
differentiation that the enacted-communal identity gap can be seen to exist in this study.

This discussion was designed to answer the second research question in this study, which asked how these strategies of identity development and portrayal utilized on Twitter can be understood as operating within the personal, the enactment, the relationship, and the communal frames. When looking at this from a holistic perspective, one can see the discovered strategies in this study as showing a reflection of the participants’ identities, through presentation of personal identity (personal frame), actions taken on Twitter (enactment frame) interaction with other users (relationship frame), and the general participation in Twitter, as well as the use of specific hashtags (communal frame). Furthermore, CTI’s concept of identity gaps can be used to show how each of these frames operate together, as well as how the existing dialectical tensions between them can portray the frames as coexisting and working together as part of one’s identity.
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

Applying Hecht’s Communication Theory of Identity to interview and observational data from Twitter users yielded insight into the ways in which these users developed and portrayed their online identity on Twitter. The two research questions that were answered in this study were as follows:

a) What strategies do Twitter users utilize in order to develop and portray their online identity on Twitter?

b) How can these strategies of identity development and portrayal utilized on Twitter be understood as operating within the personal, the enactment, the relationship, and the communal frames?

This conclusion chapter will serve as a reflection of the themes that were found in this study and how they fit into the frames of CTI, as well as the limitations and future direction of this study. First, the analysis chapter will be examined, focusing on the four themes that were found. Second, the discussion chapter will be revisited and final conclusions will be drawn regarding how the use of CTI aided this study. Third, the limitations that were found throughout the research process will be presented. Lastly, possibilities for future research will be explored.

In the analysis chapter the first research question was answered through the presentation of four themes, which were seen as strategies used by participants when developing and portraying their online identity on Twitter. These themes were as follows: Reflection of the Self, Acknowledgment of the Audience, Purpose of Twitter as a Means to Stay Updated and/or Update Others, and Comparison to Other
Social Networks. The first theme presented, Reflection of the Self, shows how Twitter users in this study saw their Twitter profile as a reflection of their own identity. Furthermore, these users discussed strategies that they used when they felt their profile did not represent their identity in the way that they wanted to be represented.

Participant discussion of the audience brings us to the next theme, which was referred to as Acknowledgment of the Audience. In this theme, participants discussed aspects of the consciousness of an audience when operating on Twitter. Participants examined not only a consciousness of an audience, but also a realization that their audience may interpret information presented on their Twitter profile differently than they had intended. Furthermore, when negative indications from the audience were received by the user, the participants discussed strategies to correctly navigate the presentation of their identity. These strategies were known as feelings of regret, attempt to adjust perceptions, and indifference.

The third theme that was presented in this study was known as Purpose of Twitter as a Means to Stay Updated and/or Update Others. This theme looked into reasons why users choose to actively participate in the use of Twitter. This theme was broken up into two subthemes, both representing the seeking of information and the presentation of information. Each subtheme was further organized into three categories, which naturally mirrored categories received from work by Page (2012). These sections were known as corporate, celebrity, and ‘ordinary,’ and were meant to reflect the type of information that Twitter users both receive and present.
Material derived from this theme show the type of information that participants in this study seek and pass on to their audience.

Lastly, the fourth theme was known as Comparison to Other Social Networks. While this theme was not as strategic as the other three, it presented a natural occurring topic that presented itself during interviews, which was the connection of Twitter to other social networking forms, including Facebook and Instagram. This theme showed not only the discussion of these other forms of social networks, but also the technological affordances provided by Twitter and the other forms of social networks to create a literal connection from one social network form to the other. This connection between different forms of social networks requires further navigation from Twitter users. While this further navigation was touched on in the explanation of this theme, it was not the focus of this study and will therefore be discussed in the section of this chapter that will look into further possible avenues for this research.

The second research question was answered in the discussion chapter, in which the themes were applied within the scope of CTI. Conclusions derived in the discussion can be utilized to broaden the scope of CTI, to encompass the frame of online identity development. Through critical analysis, specific themes were presented that represented strategies used by Twitter users when developing and portraying their online identity. These themes were seen to operate within the personal, the enactment, the relationship, and the communal frames of CTI. By understanding how these themes operate within each of the frames, one can gain
further insight into how CTI can help to better understand the development and portrayal of online identity. Furthermore, the concept of identity gaps was used to show the potential for dialectical tensions to emerge between aspects of portrayed online identity. For example, one may see their online identity in one way (personal frame), but the information that they choose to present (enactment frame) may not represent their identity in the way that they had intended. By understanding how these dialectical tensions may arise, one can have insight into aspects of online identity that have not yet been explored.

Now that the significant findings in this study have been explored, the limitations will be explained. The first limitation for this study is related to the limited demographic of the participants found for this study. Because of the location of the study, many of the participants had very similar characteristics, such as their age, ethnic background, socioeconomic position, and nationality. Just as in any study, the variation of these types demographics can be seen to result in more conclusive data. While I do not see this factor as invalidating the information found in this study, I do believe it would be useful to look for a greater variation of participants for future research.

The second limitation that will be discussed is the lack of previously conducted research of online identity, within the scope of CTI. While the use of CTI to explore online identity for the first time does allow for new and innovative research, it was difficult to navigate this study without any previously conducted research to be used as guidance. This became especially apparent when the
development of asymmetrical relationships on Twitter was explored. CTI does not account for this type of asymmetrical relationship development, which therefore gave no ground for the use of the relationship frame in this way. That being said, I believe that the use of CTI as a framework to explore online identity development can be seen as a valuable contribution to the currently existing CTI and online identity research.

These limitations should not be seen as influencing the practicality of utilizing CTI to explore online identity development on Twitter. The use of this theory gave insight into the development and portrayal of online identity on Twitter, as well as a general idea of online identity development. These limitations provide for an understanding of how future utilization of CTI in an online setting should be navigated.

Future research could look at more specific aspects seen within this study, such as the dynamic between social networks that are technologically afforded to be connected and to interact between each other. Specific to Twitter, its uniqueness as a medium for communication allows for an abundance of potential research topics, such as an exploration of the development of asymmetrical relationships on Twitter, the implications of a limited word-allowance when attempting to express identity on Twitter, and the effect that a data-gathering system within Twitter through hashtags has on ideological and social developments. With computer-mediated communication on the rise, the study of online identity development is crucial, not only within the fields of Speech Communication and Anthropology, but also in
subsequent fields that utilize identity development research. This study can support a wide variety of research, and has the potential to help others navigate through research that focuses on online identity development.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview (Part 1)

1. What is your first name?
2. What is your age?
3. What is the name on your twitter account?
4. What made you choose the name for your twitter account?
5. What motivated you to get a twitter account?
6. How long have you had a twitter account?
7. What would you say motivates you the most to keep actively using your twitter account?
8. What topics do you tweet about the most?
9. Are there certain topics that you avoid tweeting about?
   - Why or why not?
10. How many followers do you have?
    - Is this number important to you?
      - Why or why not?
11. How many other twitter users do you follow?
    - Is this number important to you?
      - Why or why not?
12. How would you describe your followers?

13. Would you say majority of the twitter accounts that you follow are corporate, celebrity, or ‘ordinary’ accounts (Page, 2012)?
   - Why do you choose to follow these types of users the most?

14. Would you say majority of the twitter accounts that follow you are corporate, celebrity, or ‘ordinary’ accounts (Page, 2012)?
   - Does this affect what you choose to tweet?

15. How often do you interact with other twitter users? (How many times per day? How many times per week?)

16. What influences you to interact with other users?

17. Do other's responses on twitter influence your emotions?
   - Why or why not?

18. Have you ever gotten a response from another user that you didn’t anticipate?
   - How did this make you feel?

19. Have you ever regretted posting a tweet?
   - If yes, what about the tweet influenced this feeling of regret?

20. Have you ever taken a tweet down?
   - If yes, what influenced your decision to take the tweet down?

21. Is there a tweet that you were particularly proud of?
   - What made you proud of that particular tweet?
22. Describe the process of creating a tweet (from the event that made you want to tweet to its submission).

23. How often do you use hashtags within your tweets? (i.e. the # symbol)

24. What is your reasoning for using hashtags within your tweets?

Interview (Part 2): After the previously listed questions are asked, the participant and the student researcher will open the computer provided by the student researcher and will look at the participant’s twitter account together. This step in the interview process will have been presented and agreed upon prior to the interview, both in the initial email and in the signing of the consent form. Once the twitter account is open, the following questions may be asked, depending on the nature of the tweets presented.

1. What was your reasoning behind producing this tweet?

2. Who was your intended audience for this tweet?

3. Why did you utilize this specific hashtag?

4. Why did you utilize the @ symbol and include this user in your tweet?

Interview Conclusion:

1. Is there another twitter user who you could suggest for this study?
   - If so, do I have your permission to contact them through email and state that you suggested them for this study?