A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY OF SOCIAL MEDIA LITERACY

AND IDENTITY INFLUENCE: TRADITIONAL-AGE UNDERGRADUATE

STUDENTS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

BY

KENNETH W. HORNE, JR.

ADVISOR: DR. AMANDA O. LATZ

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, INDIANA

MAY 2013

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I know I could not have accomplished anything without the support and guidance of wonderful faculty members such as Dr. Roger Wessel and Dr. Thalia Mulvihill. From start to finish I have been challenged to step outside of my comfort zone to produce an element of research that aligns closely with greatness. I can finally say that I have made it.

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ABSTRACT

THESIS: A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence: Traditional-Age Undergraduate Students and Their Experiences with Social Media.

STUDENT: Kenneth W. Horne, Jr.

DEGREE: Master of Arts in Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education

COLLEGE: Teachers College

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The purpose of this study was to understand how traditional-aged undergraduate students describe their experiences with social media. Another focus was to gain students' perspectives to contribute to the growing body of research that currently exists.

Each of the 17 students who participated in this study self-identified as a traditional-age undergraduate student who utilized various forms of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The sample was comprised of participants ranging from the ages of 18 to 24 years of age. No other factors were considered for eligibility criteria.

For this study I utilized a constructivist grounded theory methodological approach (Charmaz, 2006). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), the grounded theory methodology is essential for researchers who are interested in transferring research findings to other settings. The study was conducted at a mid-sized, Midwestern doctoral-granting, high research activity institution.

Each nested subtheme was either placed in the theme of communication or development. The nested subthemes were: conflict and misunderstanding, context clues

and language, separation and disconnect, and ownership and self-assessment. The

analysis of data ultimately led to the development of the Theory of Social Media Literacy

and Identity Influence.

       This study is relevant to both student affairs professionals and faculty members

because with the advent of social media, there are developmental factors impacting

students that are not present in the current literature as it pertains to undergraduate

students.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I sat at the computer in my office preparing to engage the students in my class in a conversation based on how one represents one's self online. As I thumbed through the text we had for the course, I focused on how outdated some of the material was. Emphasis was placed on email etiquette, and though I considered it to be relevant, I thought it only considered only one piece to a very large puzzle. In my role as an Assistant Residence Hall Director, I thought about ways I could get my students to engage in conversation about their online presence.

I figured the best way to initiate that conversation was to use the students in my class as the subjects. Before the start of class I pulled up the class roster, and I began to search each student on Twitter because that was the site I had open at the time. In most cases, the content I observed on their pages was contradictory to what I experienced in a face-to-face setting with my students, and it seemed the more I searched for content the more I was surprised by what was being posted online. Some of the content were so unbelievable I just decided to forego my idea all together. On the bright side, we were able to have a great in-class conversation about their beliefs of social media.

The class discussion contributed to my curiosity about student perceptions of how they describe their use of social media. From my perspective, there was a disconnect

between the way they portrayed themselves online versus how they portrayed in a face-to-face setting. I became obsessed with seeking out other students to see if the information I found would be consistent. My curiosity brought me to the point of conducting research so I could directly ask students about their perceptions about social media and the way they describe how they engage with social media.

Chapter One of this thesis provides a brief overview of my study, wherein I addressed the following research question: How do traditional-aged undergraduate students describe their experiences with social media? Throughout this chapter, I introduce the study and describe its significance. Also included in this chapter are the statement of purpose, the research question, the definitions of terminology, and the overall organization of this thesis.

Introduction to the Study

Today's traditional-aged undergraduate students are immersed in a digital culture that seeps into every part of their generational experience. Dean (2012) referred to this millennial generation as one developing in a "2.0 world and beyond" (p. xvi). Black (2010) described these college students as "digital natives" who are "dependent on technology" (p. 94) and as individuals who are constantly connected at any given time in any given place. Within higher educational settings in particular, this is critical because technology policy has continued to impact various aspects of the traditional undergraduate college experience including: how these students have established relationships with one another, how colleges and universities respond to new technology, and how students have created and how college personnel have perceived digital identities.

Technological advancements have consistently impacted all aspects of our lives, and college students are not an exception to this rule. When it comes to socialization on college campuses, students often make a variety of connections with other individuals prior to the time they arrive on the physical college campus. One example of this in particular correlated with my experience as an Assistant Hall Director. Over the summer when students have received confirmation of their roommate pairing, it is not uncommon for them to connect with one another via Facebook or Twitter, but certainly through email at the very least. Participation in social media usage has been one method that allows this to happen, and trends in higher education suggest colleges and universities are embracing this aspect of the college cultural experience. College and university environments foster development of many different types of student relationships, particularly within an online context.

In the publication *Social Media Strategy for Higher Education* by Byl (2012), it was written that "95% of college admissions offices use some form of social media" (p. 122). The amount of emphasis afforded to social media strategy has been integral in connecting college and university personnel with students, to work in a way to meet students in an environment in which they are comfortable. In my experience, our department has been intentional about connecting with potential and current students to increase awareness of certain processes such as the room sign-up process. Thanks to social media, these processes have been transformed to model interactions students have within an online context, thus making the experience a familiar one to the students.

Haythornthwaite (2002) shared a perspective regarding the types of relationships that are created and maintained through computer-mediated means. The study revealed

some revelations about the way students interact with one another in different circumstances. One of Haythornthwaite's conclusions illustrated how providing multiple means of communication to groups members allows them to use the communication form that works best for their style. This study expanded upon this concept through inquiry and focus on how student communication styles differ in an online, social media setting as opposed to traditional means of face-to-face communication.

Throughout this study I explored the anonymous nature of social media usage. Focus was afforded to college students in particular, and I was able to make sense of the relationship between how students perceive their real and their online senses of self. Anonymity was pertinent to social media use because social media sites allow "opportunit[ies] to use pseudonyms and forwarding services that strip all identifying marks" (Marx, 1999, p. 99) making it more and more difficult to identify and understand the person behind the profile. In addition, I explored account user settings, profile image selection, and other considerations associated with naming one's self on the World Wide Web.

This qualitative research study was developed and carried out in accordance with the tenets of the constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006). It is a more comprehensive and larger-scale study that stemmed from an initial phenomenological research project I completed for a graduate course. Overall, there were 17 participants who provided their experiences with social media through one-on-one interviews with me, and the meaning of the gathered data was constructed based on coding and transcribing those interviews. I learned that students explained their experiences with social media as involved, complex, rewarding, and enjoyable. Last but

not least, I was able to construct the Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence based on my interpretation of the data, in addition to available literature at the time.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how traditional-aged undergraduate students described their experiences with social media. One of the primary foci was to gain students' perspectives to contribute to the growing body of research that currently exists. This research journey on which I embarked assisted me in the development of a grounded theory that provides one possible explanation of the student perspective related to how they describe their experiences with social media.

Research Question

Through this study I addressed the following research question: How do traditional-aged undergraduate students describe their experiences with social media? I focused on one research question because I was looking for the elucidation of experiences from the participants that lent themselves to the development of a theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) referred to the grounded theory methodology as one that provides—at the conclusion of a study—a theoretical explanation of a phenomenon. I applied this methodology to the social processes of traditional aged college students and their experiences with social media, and based on this study I produced a response to the original guiding research question in the form of a constructivist grounded theory entitled the Theory of Social Media Language and Identity Influence.

Significance of the Study

This research was both significant and critical because most of what we know about why college students' use of social media has been informed by the perspective of scholars and researchers. This research introduced the student perspective—the student voice. In addition, this research is necessary because social media is often described as something that transforms student interaction and engagement within and throughout the college experience (Thompson, 1995).

This research was also necessary, because most colleges and universities are in a position to form policies based on student use of social media. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education* one contributor focused on a university policy reform that sought to require social media users to relinquish their social media usernames and passwords to the university. In this *Chronicle* article, Rice (2011) wrote about a social media proposal in which the university sought editing privileges for any social media related to the university. This one example was crucial because it revealed college and university personnel have an awareness of college student presence within social media context. This is just one example of the brainstorming phase of the development and implementation of social media policies within higher education contexts.

Other examples of social media policies that were already established were available as well. In my experience as an assistant hall director, it was difficult for me to hear examples of negative student experiences that occurred within various social media contexts. It was also difficult to be further informed that there was really nothing that could be done considering that some higher education policies have not caught up to the issues that stemmed from social media. Because this study was conducted at a

Midwestern institution, I looked for examples of colleges and universities in the Midwest that had implemented social media policies. What I primarily found was this is an area undergoing some form of development for the most part; however, one institution had established guidelines and policies surrounding personal branding which included a liability clause associated with social media usage. DePaul University (2006) posted.

Be aware of liability. You're legally liable for what you post on your own site and on the sites of others. Individual bloggers have been held liable for commentary deemed to be proprietary, copyrighted, defamatory, libelous or obscene (as defined by the courts). Employers are increasingly conducting Web searches on job candidates before extending offers. Be sure that what you post today will not come back to haunt you. (para. 14)

In addition to statement mentioned above, DePaul also posted the following as it pertained to student conduct within social media contexts.

Obviously, using university computing resources to threaten or harass anyone is a violation of the acceptable use and the anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies, which "forbids any unlawful harassment which includes any behavior (verbal, written, or physical) that abuses, assails, intimidates, demeans or victimizes or has the effect of creating a hostile environment for any person based on protected characteristics (i.e., race, color, ethnicity, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, age, marital status, parental status, family relationship status, physical or mental disability, military status)." [quotation marks denote verbatim reference to university policy] Violating any university

policy while using social media can trigger consequences under the progressive

discipline policy. (para. 15)

The amount of literature surrounding higher education policy reform was illustrated

within the accounts of the participants based on their experiences within social media

contexts. Additionally, the coding process of the interview transcriptions highlighted a

larger implication social media has on student development. This is best illustrated

through the experience of one of the research participants:

Yeah—yeah you could say that. I always hear stuff like, young people don't do

the same things we did when I was younger, and I'm always like, duh. Think

about it, how do you think things would have been if social media came out when

our grandparents were younger, you know? We just get a bad rep for having

different communications styles. If I'm content with only talking to people online,

then that's what I like. It's no big deal. It's just a new type of normal. We need to

adjust to it. (@Mr_Mister, Transcription)

One of the final components I identified throughout this study surrounded

elements of student digital identity development, specifically as it pertained to language

and context. Interviewing the students was a learning experience for me as a researcher

because the participants used new language that stemmed from their experiences with

social media. Within that context, the participants were led to form a preliminary

understanding of rules of engagement as they pertain to interactions rooted in social

media. Some examples that are explained throughout the text include: hashtagghing,

retweeting, subtweeting, and stalking (as it pertains to social media). This terminology

was used throughout each interview to explain positive and negative interactions students

have had within social media contexts. Additionally, based on my analysis, I presented the possibility that older generations have an expectation that today's millennial generation, specifically traditional aged college students, processes through situations using a skillset, which this generation currently does not have.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as follows for the sake of this study.

Social media—any website through which students have to create and maintain a profile with the intent and purpose of connecting with other individuals.

Hashtagging—a method used to categorize and identify tweets.

Subtweeting—a practice in which someone directs a statement towards someone else without mentioning his or her name.

Facebook stalking—the act of viewing someone's Facebook profile to figure out information without that person having any kind of awareness.

Traditional-age undergraduate student—any student, age 18-24, working towards a bachelor's degree.

Theme—a type of categorization of data employed through constructivist grounded theory. For this study, the findings were organized into two main themes.

Communication—a theme constructed based on the coding of participant interviews. Communication refers to interactions within social media contexts that take place between one or more students.

Development—a theme constructed based on the coding of participant interviews. Development refers to absent and present skills evident in social media exchanges.

Nested subtheme—a nested subtheme refers to subcategorization to better articulate a theme. Nested subthemes exist within themes. For this study, the nested subthemes are: conflict and misunderstanding, context and language, separation and disconnect, and ownership and self-assessment.

Conflict and misunderstanding—a nested subtheme of communication. It accounts for negative experiences stemming from social media.

Context clues and language—a nested subtheme of communication. It accounts for specialized language used to articulate social media experiences.

Separation and disconnect—a nested subtheme of development. It accounts for students' experiences of their social media version of self differentiated from their normal sense of self.

Ownership and self-assessment—a nested subtheme of development. It accounts for students' awareness or a lack thereof of their online presence and behavior

Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence—a theory that is both grounded in and constructed from the data gathered throughout this study. One's online sense of self is derived from experiences with specialized social media language, interactions, and one's understanding of other-user perception. This online sense of self, while often differentiated from the everyday self often does influence the everyday version of self.

Organization of the Project

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter Two contains a review of related literature concerning researcher perspectives on how college students have used social media, and perspectives on how technological advancements have transformed the

ways in which interpersonal interaction takes place. Chapter Three includes a description of both the research design and methodology. Specific methods are also explained. Data were gathered through a series of interviews with traditional age undergraduate college students, and the methodology was constructivist grounded theory. According to Charmaz (2006), the grounded theory methodology "consist[s] of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (p. 2). Chapter Four presents the major findings of the study and implications. For this study the findings resulted in two themes: communication and development. Additionally, the themes were enhanced further by the presentation of nested subthemes: conflict and misunderstanding, context clues and language, separation and disconnect, and ownership and self-assessment. Chapter Four also includes the theory that resulted from employing the contructivist grounded theory methodology, the Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence. The chapter concludes with a discussion surrounding the findings. Chapter Five relates these findings to the research questions and includes the following components: summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for further research. A list of references and appendices are included at the end of the paper.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

With different technological advancements there exists the possibility to transform the way we exist on a day-to-day basis. Social media is no exception to the rule. Traditional communication models have broken down and disrupted the ways in which we relate to each other in the context of face-to-face communication, nonverbal communication, and computer-mediated communication (CMC). Advancements in CMC could explain the breakdown in person-to-person interaction, but it cannot fully explain why that type of communication is preferred over more traditional models. Anderson, Park, and Walther (1994) wrote about elements of "impersonality" and "hostility" (p. 461) associated with CMC because of an inability to interpret nonverbal cues, which are prominent in a face-to-face context. In addition, current research privileges the authorial voices of the researchers but neglects to adequately showcase the voices of those who make use of social media as an integral part of their lives. One such collective voice that should be showcased is that of traditional-age undergraduate students.

The literature, as it pertains to social media, has made a continuous effort to differentiate interactions that occur in an online setting from interactions that occur in a

face-to-face setting. According to Hogan (2010), a major variable is grounded in the fact that media contexts do not allow participants to employ limits in terms of how they present themselves to others. Hogan noted how "media provide[s] a window into the private lives of others" (p. 380), thus making available personal details that may have otherwise remained hidden from the public perception. This reality and function of social media makes it a critical component in how individuals develop their perceptions and manifestations of their self.

As it pertains to traditional-aged undergraduate students, different student accounts from the data gathered from the interviews has proven that student have an awareness of their online presence. Goode (2010) wrote about "identity" as the common "product" that arises from "participation in communities" (p. 502). This is a key concept to be applied within the research, because participation as referenced by Goode placed an emphasis on the individual contribution to a large group experience of social media. In addition, Goode discussed the continued identity exploration through story telling done via social media interaction. An interesting factor presented in the article stemmed from the idea that students are ultimately cultured to experiment with various technologies starting as early as high school. Thus, when students make transitions from a high school setting to institutions of higher learning, it can be inferred that they transition their physical self in addition to their online self.

Student self-description of engagement within various social media context has shown a greater emphasis placed on one's perception of social media influence. Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto, and Grummadi (2010) wrote about how influence within a social media context is made of three specific parts: mentioning, repeating, and connecting.

Mentioning referred to how many times a person is referenced in a post, repeating referred to how many times a person's post is reposted, and connecting referred to the number of friends a person has all within a social media context. Additionally, Cha et al. mentioned how the "dynamics of influence" have a tendency to vary "across topics and time" (p. 17). Essentially these concepts worked together to explain why college students were drawn to social media in the first place.

<div align="center">**Social Media and Those Who Use It**</div>

For this section of the literature review, two key concepts that are used throughout this study will be clarified. Those terms are social media and digital native.

Social Media

The term "social media" refers to various social sites and networks that are used to stay in contact with or to interact with other people (Chickering & Junco, 2010). Campbell, Gabriel, Wiebe, MacDonald, and McAuley (2012) further described social media as a "digital immersion" in which young people are "comfortable creating, distributing, and transforming knowledge within a digital context" (p. 3). Another trait of social media is "creating a digital record [that] opens up the possibility that other individuals will use technologies to interpret and broadcast those moments at their whim" (Iftody, Luce-Kapler, & Sumara, 2010, p. 537). Social media is transformative and constant—meaning it is always available and different people use it in different ways.

Black (2010) explained that more than 76 million college students are proficient in navigating technology and using technology as a means of communication. Students are usually tuned in with various forms of technology because "they anticipate using their laptops frequently for learning and socializing purposes" (Campbell et al., 2012, p. 6).

That said, there are differences in the way that students have been perceived to interact within a social media context.

Chickering and Junco (2010) wrote about the decrease in context clues in addition to the inability to decipher tone in a social media setting. The authors also noted that these difficulties correlate with the short communication formats present within various social media platforms. For example, multiple perspectives can be derived from a tweet that is 140 characters or less. As a result, social media often has a tendency to spiral out of control leading to disagreements between two or more people and sometimes situations involving physical harm. Chickering and Junco referred to social media as a place in which disagreements easily result in serious confrontations.

In the realm of communication, it is important to note there are always intended and unintended consequences. It can be assumed that the intended and initial point of social media sites was to allow people to communicate with one another despite distance. In addition, these sites were likely initially intended to foster personal and professional networking opportunities. Some examples may include sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook. However, unintended consequences often bring about non-positive outcomes. Iftody et al. (2010) mentioned the importance of being aware of both the "productive and destructive nature of mass communication technologies" (p. 537). The use of social media, nonetheless, continues at a swift pace.

USA Today associated press member Barbara Ortutay (2012) wrote about how more than one billion people log into Facebook each month. As social media continues to grow, it is important for users to knowledgeable about how the sites are supposed to be used versus how they are actually used. This can be an area of struggle as there is a

disconnection between older generations and people who are a part of a generation referred to as "digital natives" (Black, 2010, p. 94).

Digital Natives

Black (2010) made the claim that "today's student is dependent upon technology" and that "constant connection with friends and family at any time from any place is of vital importance to them" (p. 94). This information is critical, as it implies that constant connection underlines everything students do ranging from socialization all the way to education. Moreover, Frand (2006) noted.

Digital natives, fluent in acquiring and using technological tools and learning this technology quickly with an intuitive understanding of digital language, seem to use these tools as an extension of their brains. As members of the first generation to grow up with digital technology, they can speak its language. Since birth, Gen Y has been surrounded by visual electronic media, from Sesame Street to MTV and from home computers and video games to cyberspace, networks, and virtual reality. This generation is accustomed to hypertext, downloaded music, communication via cell phone and text messaging, and information from laptops. Digital natives multitask and prefer visuals to graphics and text. They are intricately connected or networked via cell phone, blog, Facebook, and YouTube, thriving on instant gratification and preferring games to work. In fact, they do not remember and cannot imagine a world without digital technology. (p. 14)

Essentially, students who are a part of the "millennial generation" (Noren, 2011) are introducing a variety of skills that challenge perceptions of how things have traditionally

been done. Prensky (2001b) referred to millennials as speakers of "the digital language of computers, video games, and the internet" (p. 1).

To put things into perspective, the difference between digital natives and individuals of older generations can be quantified within the following statistical information. Digital natives spend upwards of 10,000 hours playing video games, 20,000 hours watching movies, and 200,000 hours engaged in internet activity throughout the course of their lifetime. The unfortunate statistic is that digital natives barely spend 5,000 hours reading books (Prensky, 2001a).

Technology and Relationships

With the advent of social media, students have arrived at a place in which relationship development and maintenance has changed. Black (2010) noted how the rise of social media sites and social media presence has worked to redefine friendship. It is also noted how some of these developments work in a way that allows friendships (both old and new) to flourish. In addition to the relationship-building component, other research focused on the negative components of relationship development. Haythornthwaite (2002) discussed the "ebb and flow" (p. 387) in online relationship ties. Basically, relationships formed and maintained online have their limits. Once they have fulfilled their intended outcome, they are disregarded.

Chickering and Junco (2010) noted how the changes in web access and social media involvement situate students to be active participants and remain connected in a digital society. They use the term "interconnectivity" (p. 12) to explain the ways college students are connected to one another. An additional point made refers to how items posted online can often times be detrimental, and lead to negative relational development

resulting in cyberbullying and online harassment (p. 13). Carvalho, Mahdavi, Smith, and Tippett (2006) defined cyberbullying as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time" (p. 1). McDonald and Roberts-Pittman (2011) reported that 22% of college students identified as being victims of cyberbullying and nine percent of college students reported being initiators of cyberbullying. The study also showed that of the 38% of college students who knew someone was the victim of cyberbullying, only nine percent reported the information to someone else.

A final aspect of the impact of technology on relationship development is related to the manifestation of one's physical and online self. Haythornthwaite (2002) wrote, "it becomes difficult to separate online from offline influences on relationships" (p. 388). The issue becomes using these social media forms as substitutions for face-to-face communication as opposed to using them in conjunction with face-to-face communication.

Digital Identity Development

As is typical for any aspect of identity development, digital identity is formed based on perception. Iftody et al. (2010) described how "perceptual experience is conditioned by how we believe others perceive us, and in this interplay of perceptions, we develop the ability to imagine other minds" (p. 539). Taking this concept and applying it to what we know about college students can help to explain a perceived disconnect students may have about how they represent themselves in the physical world versus how they represent themselves in the cyber world.

Online presence in social media contexts can be equated to what Iftody et al. (2010) referred to as "celebrity culture" (p. 537). The idea is that online presence extends beyond interactions with people with whom one has direct contact. Given the ease with which one's social media site affiliation can travel nationwide and even worldwide, it can be assumed that any page extends beyond a small circle of family members and friends. Stoller (2012) wrote,

> As students develop their traditional academic abilities, another area of development has emerged. Digital identity may be the next addition to the core. The manner in which we engage, share, promote, and present ourselves online has become a major facet in many of our lives. No longer seen as being separate from "real life," an individual's digital identity is intricately connected to their overall identity. Developing the ability to use digital communication/interaction channels isn't about the dusty rhetoric of "natives" versus "immigrants." Instead, digital identity development occurs via a broader context. It's about having a shared baseline of knowledge. (para. 2)

Stoller's perspective is important because this aspect of digital identity development contributes to what he has referred to as a "foundational experience" (para. 1), meaning students must understand how their online development of self impacts other aspects of life.

Anonymity

Marx (1999) said: "Anonymity is fundamentally social. Anonymity requires an audience of at least one person" (p. 100). A trademark of social media presence surrounds the idea that one can be whoever one wants to be. Through social media, one has the

authority to alter a name, an age, a location, an image, and personality traits. Sometimes the social media sites themselves can prompt a preference to be anonymous. For example, being a Twitter user allows one to choose a pseudonym that becomes representative of the individual. Marx discussed how the cyberspace environment makes it relatively easy to use pseudonyms, and how the use of pseudonyms allows for secrecy.

Along with the secrecy associated with anonymity, it is important to analyze how that impacts online behavior. Iftody et al. (2010) mentioned the development of "characters" or "fictional identifications" (p. 538) who become involved in the everyday lives of a variety of people. In addition, Marx (1999) described how the cyber environment encourages "experimentation and risk taking without facing large consequences, risk of failure or embarrassment since one's identity is protected" (p. 104). Chickering and Junco (2010) elaborated further by describing online as a safe haven from addressing many forms of confrontation in a face-to-face context (p. 15).

Summary

The literature presented herein provided information within the following categories: an overview of social media, an explanation of students as digital natives, elements of digital identity development, and topics surrounding anonymity. This chapter was transformed since the delivery of the thesis proposal and prior to data collection as more data collection (i.e., beyond the pilot study that guided the present inquiry) lent itself to additional interpretations of student experiences with social media. The review of literature continued throughout the entire course of this study as is typical within grounded theory approaches to research (Charmaz, 2006).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Chapter Three outlines the methodology and methods used in this study to explore traditional aged undergraduate college student experiences with social media. This chapter also contains the statement of purpose; research question; design of the study, which includes the methodology, setting, population, sample, data collection procedures; and summary.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how traditional-aged undergraduate students described their experiences with social media. One of the primary foci was to gain students' perspectives to contribute to the growing body of research that currently exists. This research journey on which I embarked assisted me in the development of a grounded theory that provides one possible explanation of the student perspective related to how they describe their experiences with social media. This research is critical because most of what is known about why college students use social media comes from the perspectives of the researcher rather than the students. One of the most important aspects of this research was the introduction of the student voice into the existing research about social media usage among undergraduate students.

Research Question

The following research question will guide this thesis: How do traditional age college undergraduate students describe their experiences with social media?

Design of Study

Research Methodology

This study has its roots in a pilot study focused on how traditional aged undergraduate college students describe their experiences with social media. The pilot study was smaller in scope, and a phenomenological approach (Lester, 1999) was employed—meaning that the purpose of the original study was to identify the phenomena of how traditional aged undergraduate college students described their experiences with social media. Interest in this topic and resultant pilot study were derived from my participation in a graduate level course, which was focused on ethnography. I enrolled in the class with the intent of learning more about qualitative research and design to assist me in the process of completing a research component of my graduate studies. I knew all along that the research in that course would somehow influence the development of my thesis. I knew I needed to settle on a research topic to make the most of my course experience.

An area of interest for me has always been social media. My own experiences with social media have often led me to question the relationship between online and offline behavior and presence. Given the fascination I had based on my own experiences, I figured there would be value in taking one personal account (my own) and applying it—as a starting point—to better understand a larger population. I chose to focus on traditional aged undergraduate college students because it was a student population with

which I had a great deal of access considering my position as a graduate-level Hall Director. Additionally, my work experiences had shown me there was a real need for some research in this area considering the experiences a majority of my students were having with social media. The majority of those conflicts stemmed from issues between one or more students in the community.

The initial search for literature pulled me in a variety of directions. I learned many people had a lot to say about social media, but no one seemed to care about what I was looking for in particular—no one had taken the time to share college undergraduate student accounts about their experiences with social media. I thought it was interesting, especially considering there were a lot of assumptions were being made about student experiences with social media. It was in that moment I decided I wanted to make my contribution to the literature by collecting and seeking to understand the student voice.

After I settled on the topic for my research I thought about the methods I would use to structure my research project. I initially wanted to use constructivist grounded theory because I knew there would be a substantial amount of data that would allow me to generate theory grounded in the data to make meaning of traditional aged undergraduate college student experiences with social media. I saw this research project for the class as a way for me to truly develop as a researcher. I moved forward making the necessary provisions for my research. I completed the necessary Institutional Review Board narrative form and received permission to carry out the study [see Appendix A], developed a consent form [see Appendix C], developed an interview protocol [see Appendix B], and gathered preliminary research based on my research question. The final component left in the inquiry process was conducting and analyzing the interviews.

As I was gathering data from interviews I was also preparing to defend my thesis proposal to my thesis committee members. I had composed a working document that consisted of Chapters One, Two, and Three of my thesis. Additionally, I was eager to share my experiences from being in the field and interviewing students. During the thesis proposal defense, I was made aware of an interview error I was making that ultimately rendered the data I already gathered as too limited to lend itself to the development of theory grounded in the data. The longest interview I had at that point had only lasted approximately 22 minutes. The solution from that meeting was to use the already gathered data to form what became a pilot study for my larger research project (i.e., this thesis). Essentially, I shifted my focus from generating theory to understanding a phenomenon.

For the pilot study, my data was still driven by the question: how do traditional aged college undergraduate students describe their experiences with social media? After gathering data from 10 interviews I coded each interview looking for common themes that linked one participant to another participant, and I was able to assert a broad answer to the research question. Traditional aged undergraduate college students described their experiences with social media as being communal, communicative, and developmental. I was able to find research that addressed some tangential components of the findings, but I was still interested in finding a deeper meaning stemming from the data surrounding my research question. That said, I used my larger research project—the present study—as an opportunity to provide me with some of the answers I initially sought.

For this study I utilized a constructivist grounded theory methodological approach (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivist grounded theory will allow for the construction of theory

surrounding why college students use social media. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), the grounded theory methodology is essential for researchers who are interested in transferring research findings to other settings. Through the process of interviewing students and coding those interviews I was able to gather data and build theory that points towards "a general explanation" pertaining to the act of using social media (Creswell, 2007, p. 83).

Memoing

An essential component of contstructivist grounded theory is memoing. According to Creswell (2007), "memoing becomes part of developing theory as the researcher writes down ideas as data are collected and analyzed" (p. 85). One of the integral components of using this method was tracking the development of the theory. I tracked my thought process throughout the course of this study, and the time following each interview was used as an opportunity for me to check, analyze, and describe my interaction with the data through the creation of analytic memos.

Throughout this process memoing was not something with which I was consistent. In the earlier parts of data collection I did not understand natural ways to write about what I was experiencing. I did not understand how taking the time to write about every little detail would contribute to how I was able to make sense of the data in the way that I did. However, as I made the transition from focusing on data collection from a phenomenological perspective to a constructivist grounded theory perspective, I realized there was value in somehow incorporating any and everything as it pertained to my research journey. And what I realized is how much my position as a graduate Hall Director contributed a great deal to how I made meaning of the data, which is a key

understanding in the use of Charmaz's (2006) specific interpretation of the grounded theory methodology.

Aside from the interviews, I had non-formal interactions with students about their use of social media as well. I wrote about an example in which a student who was a resident of mine sought me out to chat about some issues she was having with a group of students who lived on her floor community. As she spoke to me I questioned why her experience was a negative one. I wondered why she could not handle her own problem with the group of students. I thought about what I would do in the scenario, and my response was somewhat dismissive towards the student because I did not think it was a big deal. My experience in that moment highlights the attitude most of the researchers have about social media and what it means for traditional aged college students. Social media is something students are expected to learn and navigate on their own, because no one has taken the time to systematically work through how social media should be used.

One day I walked in a hall on campus, and I saw campus police chatting with student about a social media related harassment case. Hearing the student share his or her account of how terrible the situation was made me think about differences in how social media is approached and perceived generationally. The student was bothered by the experience, and I could tell the campus police officer was dismissive of the experience given the suggestion to refrain from viewing the Twitter page. I processed through how I would have handled the situation had I been in the role of the student, and I think I would have just ignored the situation. The thing that stood out to me was how real the experience was to the student. It was in that moment I recognized there are probably some expectations we—as higher education professionals—have of students to access a

set of skills they simply may not legitimately possess. This is something I kept in mind for the sake of the data analysis portion of my research.

Data Analysis

In the data analysis portion, I focused on creating categories and subcategories for the development of a theoretical model (Creswell, 2007). I was able to generate theory based on those themes. To verify categories that could potentially lead to theory development, I relied on constant comparative analysis. Data generated from each interview was analyzed and compared to categories established from other interviews (Creswell, 2007).

After working through an initial set of interviews for the pilot study, I was not sure I was going to be able to get enough participants to produce a robust amount of data that would lend itself to the development of theory. I reached out to the interview subjects who participated for in the pilot study, and I relied on the snowball sampling method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) to get more participants. It was not difficult to get more participants, but I did have to reframe my role as an interviewer. My interactions with my thesis committee members during the proposal defense made me realize I was going to have to ascertain more information in the interview setting to make the most of the second round of interviews. One method employed to refocus the way I interviewed participants was having my interview script used on me. Merriam (2002) referred to this as a peer review process.

My thesis advisor and I decided to review my interview protocol to determine whether or not it was substantial enough to get the rich data required for a constructivist grounded theory study. Additionally, the aim of the reverse interview was to provide me

with a model after which I could alter my interviewing style. Based on the mock

interview it was determined the questions in my interview script were good enough to to

get me the information I was after, but emphasis had to be placed on the semi-structured

nature of the interviews. After the mock interview, I was able better engage the

participants to generate rich data.

In terms of the procedure, data gathering started with student interviews. The

interviews lasted anywhere from 42 to 55 minutes, which was in increase from the

duration of the first round of interviews used for the pilot study. Those interviews ranged

from 15 to 22 minutes. Also, for the second round of interviews data was gathered from

17 participants as opposed to the data gathered from 10 participants in the pilot study. In

accordance with the constant comparative analytic component critical within the

grounded theory design, data analysis was done for each interview individually. Bogdan

and Biklen (2007) noted the incorporation of constant comparative analysis from early on

in a given study through to completion of the study. Transcripts were created from each

interview, and those transcriptions were the first step in generating categories and codes

in the data analysis process. Because data collection and data analysis were expected to

happen concurrently in order for grounded theory to be achieved, each interview was

transcribed and analyzed individually initially.

In terms of coding and analysis, I printed each interview upon completion of the

transcription. For this study, themes from the pilot phenomenological study were used as

a starting point. I employed a multicolored highlighter method to note which parts of the

transcripts correlated with certain categories and themes. This method was successful for

each of the 17 transcriptions, and similar to the pilot study, I found these themes were

broad enough to form common threads throughout each transcription. The analysis of

each transcription was compared to the analysis of the preceding transcription, and the

theory was comprised of recurring themes in each part of the data collection.

 Once the transcription of the interviews was completed and the initial round of coding

was done, I returned to the literature to see where the existing research was able to

complement my findings in addition to determining areas in which the literature was

nonexistent. These findings were compiled and presented in Chapter Four, which

discusses both the findings of my research as well as the meanings of those findings.

Setting

The university that was used for this study's setting is considered to be a doctoral-

granting, high research activity institution by the Carnegie Foundation (2011). It is a mid-

sized, Midwestern public university that primarily serves undergraduate students with

some educational opportunities for graduate students as well. Approximately 35 percent

of the total undergraduate student population resides on campus, designating the

institution as a residential university. To protect the confidentiality of the campus that

will be used in the study, any specific location names will be excluded and supplanted by

pseudonyms.

Population

Each student who participated in this study self-identified as a traditional-age

undergraduate student who utilized various forms of social media such as Facebook,

Twitter, and Instagram. The sample was comprised of participants ranging from the ages

of 18 to 24 years of age. No other factors were considered for eligibility criteria.

Sample Demographics

The study employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) to secure undergraduate student participants. Participation in this study was completely voluntary, and the informed consent document contained that detail [see Appendix C]. Pseudonyms were be used for all participants and places or persons they refer to during the interview. For each pseudonym used I asked the participant to come up with a fake Twitter handle to be used in the write up of the research.

For this research project, data were derived based on interviews conducted with the following participants, as presented in Table 1. Each pseudonym twitter handle was created by the research participant.

Table 1

Participants' Information (with pseudonym twitter handles)

	Year	Major	Sex	Date	Duration
@the_Godfather313	Freshman	Graphic Design	Male	11/19/12	48:00
@bromeo	Freshman	English	Male	11/20/12	47:02
@Ladybug10	Freshman	Undecided	Female	11/20/12	42:13
@powder_pink	Sophomore	Psychology	Female	11/21/12	43:42
@oh_audrey	Freshman	Theater	Female	11/21/12	46:07
@prince_charming	Junior	Telecommunications	Male	11/21/12	43:41
@sunshine	Sophomore	Journalism	Female	11/26/12	48:04
@twinkle_toez	Junior	Spanish	Female	11/27/12	55:40
@Fratlife69	Sophomore	Advertising	Male	11/27/12	44:08
@TheBidness	Freshman	Sports Management	Male	11/27/12	46:11
@SimplySassy	Senior	Journalism	Female	11/27/12	51:50
@Mr_Mister	Senior	Telecommunications	Male	12/2/12	49:20
@partyRox	Junior	Broadcasting	Male	12/2/12	47:44
@Jagger	Sophomore	Economics	Male	12/2/12	48:16
@Buttercup	Senior	Undecided	Female	12/4/12	50:38
@elle_woods	Freshman	Psychology	Female	12/4/12	43:21
@B5_beauty	Sophomore	Education	Female	12/5/12	54:18

Note: The date refers to the date of the interview and the duration of the interview is in minutes and seconds.

Data Collection Procedures

A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized in the process of data collection. According to DeCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) conducting semi-structured interviews is a distinct way to gather data when the interview itself is the primary source of data collection. Semi-structured interviews "are organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewees" (p. 315). The interview protocol was designed in a way that allowed for the collection of demographic information, definition of social media from the student perspective, and the frequency with which each participant uses social media. The interview environment was a mutually agreed upon location between each of the research participants and me. Each interview lasted anywhere from 42 to 55 minutes in length.

The development of the interview script came about from an activity I completed in one of my graduate research courses. Our assignment was to create a list of 15 interview questions, and subsequently use those questions to interview a peer. Edits were made in the moment based on how my peer responded to the interview questions. After the exercise, I rearranged and categorized my interview questions to enhance the flow of the interview process. Further development of my interview questions modeled the interview protocol as best explained by Creswell (2007). As for the structure of the interview script, I modeled my interview protocol after that of a former student and graduate of my current program. The interview script included categorized questions, probing questions, and transitional questions.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the initial interviews used in the phenomenological pilot study were not developed well enough to produce a level of data necessary for this constructivist grounded theory study. As an interviewer, I did not deviate from the interview protocol, and I failed to push the participants for more information about their experiences with social media. A peer review in the form of a mock interview was performed on my interview script, and my thesis advisor interviewed me as a result. Following the mock interview, each interview secured for this study was conducted in a manner true to a semi-structured interview format. Participants were probed to share more of their experiences, and my role as an interviewer was enhanced as a result of the mock interview. In addition to probing for more participant experience, I utilized more follow-up questions and I learned to become comfortable with silence in an interview setting. Each method encouraged the participant to share more of his or her experiences.

Prior to the start of each interview, I reviewed the informed consent document with each participant. Research participants were informed of the purpose of the study as well as of their rights as a research participant. Participants were reminded they were not obligated to participate in the study. Signed consent forms were stored in a secure cabinet in my office. Upon completion of this study, all data including consent forms were stored in a secure location in my home for future research purposes. Each research participant was asked for his or her permission to have each interview audio recorded. They were reminded, in accordance with the informed consent document, I was the only person who will have access to these interviews. Each interview was saved to a secured USB drive.

Data Analysis

  Each interview was transcribed and checked against the audio file for verification and accuracy purposes. This process was important to minimize error prior to coding the data. Each interview was transcribed directly following the interview for the purpose of bolstering trustworthiness or data validation (Creswell, 2007). In addition, each interview (with the exception of the initial interview) was coded on an individual basis and compared to the interview(s) conducted previously throughout the data collection process. The coding process contributed to the development of categories and subcategories that ultimately contributed to theorizing. Constant comparative analysis was critical to the grounded theory methodological process.

  Once all of the data were collected and analyzed, I constructed common themes that arose from college students sharing their descriptions of their experiences with social media. These themes were a necessary step in substantiating enough evidence for the development of a theory. Emphasis was placed on how elements of grounded theory methodology were incorporated into the design of the study.

<div align="center">

Summary

</div>

  Within this study, I sought to understand how undergraduate students described their experiences with social media. The study was be conducted at a mid-sized, Midwestern doctoral-granting, high research activity institution. The aim of this study was to build theory to complement existing theory and research on college students' use of social media. Data was collected from semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 17 participants. The data were collected during Fall 2012.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Chapter Four presents the findings from this study, wherein I examined how traditional age college students describe their experiences with social media. This chapter begins with a summary of the study followed by a detailed account of the findings, which include the following two categories and nested themes as seen in Figure 1 below. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

```
┌─────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────┐
│  Communication  │          │   Development   │
└─────────────────┘          └─────────────────┘
    ┌──────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────┐
    │  Conflict and    │        │ Separation and   │
    │ Misunderstanding │        │   Disconnect     │
    └──────────────────┘        └──────────────────┘
    ┌──────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────┐
    │ Context Clues and│        │ Ownership and    │
    │    Language      │        │ Self-assessment  │
    └──────────────────┘        └──────────────────┘
```
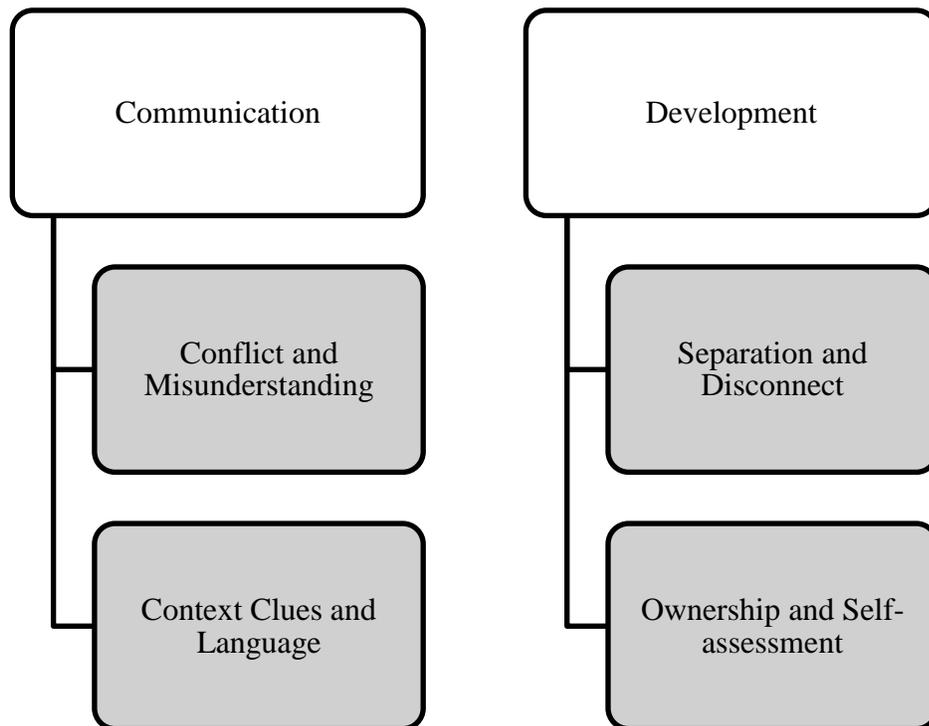
Figure 1. A visual illustration of the findings of this study.

For this research project emphasis was placed on introducing the student voice into preexisting literature as it pertains to undergraduate students and their social media use. It is important to note that as the primary investigator, I am not far removed from the research participants. Technically, I fit the research criteria for the participants, with the only exception being that I am not an undergraduate student.

In terms of social media usage, I am a user. My experiences with and observations of the research participants were somewhat easily understood based on my positionality. In addition, I serve as an employee for Housing and Residence Life, meaning gaining access to the target student audience was not difficult in the least bit. However, my experiences as an employee found a place in my research as well. Many students who did not participate in my study had social media related experiences stemming from roommate disagreements, cases or harassment, and instances of inappropriate online behavior. Being in the midst of those accounts drove me to interpret data differently at times, and it is important to account for that piece of this project.

In terms of the method chosen for this study, I selected constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). My goal was to move from collecting the data to coding and analyzing the data to generating theory based on the experiences of the students who participated in the study. Prior to completing the present study, a phenomenological pilot study was done to provide some initial understanding of this topic. I learned a great deal from the pilot study in terms of procedure, methodological choices, and data analysis. In fact, the findings from the pilot study informed my coding and analysis process. In conducting the second set of interviews (i.e., interviews for the present study), I was able to generate a great deal of new knowledge based on (a) the experiences of the research

participants, (b) data analysis that took place in the form of coding, and (c) a more comprehensive literature review.

Summary of the Research

This study examined how traditional age undergraduate college students described their experiences with social media. Students who met the inclusion criteria were invited to share their accounts and experiences. Data were gathered throughout personal interviews with 17 undergraduate students who self-identified as social media users, and the participants ranged in year in school and in years of age. It should be noted that when describing their experiences with social media use, the great majority of the participants spoke within the context of two specific social media platforms: Twitter and Facebook. I printed each interview upon completion of the purpose of transcription. For this study, themes from the pilot phenomenological study were used as a starting point. The purpose of the pilot study was to explain the phenomena of traditional aged college students describing their experiences with social media. I employed a multicolored highlighter method to note which parts of the transcripts correlated with certain categories and themes. Typically there is an open coding process associated with grounded theory; however, based on findings from the pilot study, data coding occurred with pre-existing categories in mind.

The themes that guided the coding process were communication and identity development. This method was successful for each of the 17 transcriptions, and similar to the pilot study I found these themes were broad enough to form common threads throughout each transcription. The analysis of each transcription was compared to the analysis of the preceding transcription, and the theory was comprised of recurring

subthemes in each part of the data collection. Subthemes were constructed from the interview transcripts and organized based on recurrence throughout each interview. The subthemes were then paired with themes, which were determined based on their relationship to one another.

Themes and Subthemes

Each interview conducted for this research study was conducted at a mutually agreed upon location on campus. For the most part, the interviews were conversational in nature, and they lasted from 42 to 55 minutes. Following each interview I went to my office for transcription purposes. I relied on the constant comparative method as presented by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) for the generation of themes and categories. Themes were developed based on commonalities I was able to identify and construct through the interview transcripts. Within this chapter some additional literature is introduced as it pertains to those themes and subthemes. Communication was identified as a major theme—with nested subthemes of conflict and misunderstanding and context clues and language. Another major theme constructed from the data was Development—with the nested subthemes of separation and disconnect and ownership and self-assessment.

Communication

The first theme pertinent to data analysis was communication. This theme was developed based on the stories and experiences of the participants through conflict and misunderstanding, and context clues and language. Before going into specific detail about how the literature describes this phenomenon, it is important to connect this data to the key concepts presented in Chapter Two.

Communication amongst what Frand (2006) referred to as digital natives is unique, because of an added feature to traditional communication models: social media. Chickering and Junco (2010) referred to social media as any social site or network intended to promote staying in contact with, or connecting with other people. The data collected in the form of interviews shed further perspective on how communication is further impacted through recurring subthemes. Those subthemes will be described in the next few sections of this chapter.

Conflict and misunderstanding. One common recurrence connecting each interview with one another was conflict and misunderstanding. Based on the experiences from the participants I was able to identify a trend of negative online exchanges that occurred between them and other students. While no one presented an account stemming from all negative exchanges, each participant described either one or more conflicts rooted in misunderstanding of a face-to-face interaction. One example in particular is as follows.

> I mean, like I said I am an open book. I remember over this past summer this dude was coming at me hard because his girl broke up with him and started dating me. I didn't know this dude at all before this. Anyway he became a straight up stalker. He followed me on Twitter and added me on Facebook. I ain't know who he was, I thought he was a old friend or a distant family member so I added him. He started attacking me as a person talking about how I was a pussy for taking his girls and [explicative] like that. I tried to ignore it at first but dude was nonstop with this [explicative]. After a few days I just told him to stop. I told him we can have a honorable conversation if he wanted to. He stopped after that, but the story

gets better. I was at the store one day with my little brother and I see this dude in the parking lot. I know—I know, he knew who I was and as soon as he saw me he acted like none of that [explicative] happened. Man I tell you, God was lookin' out for dude that day because if I didn't have my lil' brother we would have scraped right in that parking lot. Dude went his way and I went in the store. Next thing I know I start getting tweeted like yeah you [explicatives] you better run. I was extremely heated and disrespected. I mean—I knew what happened and he knew what happened but he just misrepresented the situation on social media. So I just told dude that the next time I see him I got a [explicative] with his name on it. Special delivery—that [explicative] really pissed me off. (@the_Godfather313, Transcription)

This is interesting because instead of turning to what is typically understood to be more traditional modes of confrontation, defined by Merriam-Webster (2012) as a situation in which people oppose or challenge one another, this is instead an example in which the people involved avoid healthy levels of confrontation, which I have argued ultimately leads to a breakdown in communication.

To further explain this interchange, attention was afforded to a concept introduced by Thompson (1995) of publicness. With this concept, traditional perceptions of the manifestation of self extend beyond the general public. The advent of social media caused attention to be afforded to "the creation of new forms of public life" (p. 235). Some of the participants mentioned feeling as though the people with whom they affiliated in various social media context were aware of their presence. Some examples are as follows.

Well I remember a girl in my volunteer group got mad because we were planning

some volunteer things and we didn't really have ideas for September. So she said

something and I noticed other people in the room didn't really like that idea based

on their reactions. So basically I just presented a different alternative and

everybody was on board. Like—I knew she just wanted to lead a project because

everyone was leading something except for her so I asked her if she wanted to

look into this and like get it organized and planned for everybody. You know,

finalize it and stuff like that. Well she just smiled and didn't really say anything to

me. Well we have like, weekly meetings and after we left the meeting I saw she

had posted some negative things about me like—nothing mentioned me

particularly but I knew and our other group members knew she was talking about

me. She mentioned my features like my blonde hair, my crazy laugh [laughter] I

mean I just knew like she was referencing me in her tweets. I know everyone

knew she was subtweeting me. (@B5_beauty, Transcription)

Another example that demonstrated this concept of publicness is based on an experience

from one of the participants through organizational involvement.

She was just up there giving her speech. She was nervous, you know. Everyone

knew about the drama between her and the other person who wanted the position.

I do think it came out of nowhere, though—they were friends. Then in the middle

of her speech, the other contender for the position started tweeting threats like I

should go up there and beat her [explicative] and she lucky there are a lot of

people in here right now. You know, stuff like that. Unnecessary stuff. Honestly I

was surprised she posted something like that on social media in the first place,

'cause it's not like her account was private. Everybody knew exactly who she was talking about, and she didn't even care. It's a shame. (@TheBidness, Transcription)

One final example that further demonstrated the concept was summed up by a statement shared by one of the participants throughout the course of her interview. @oh_audrey stated "people join Twitter and they think they have center stage. They think everyone is watching their performance, and they act out to get the type reaction they're looking for. Truth is—no one cares" (Transcription). Based on how I understand these experiences, they were prime examples of the mindset many traditional aged undergraduate college students have when it comes to what is posted in social media contexts. Social media has created a space in which not only students are hyper aware, but I have argued they feel other people are highly aware of them as well.

The participants who were interviewed for this study shared experiences of how they were able to fit into the social media public. In describing their experiences participants revealed ending friendships, being a third party observer to other people's drama, and having small problems blown out of proportion all within social media contexts. Interestingly enough, most of these examples were drawn from experiences with the social media platform, Twitter. An example that stood out in particular focused on an instance in which a friendship amongst three students was ended because of comments that were made and interpreted via Twitter. Neither of the friends engaged in conversations about the situation outside of twitter. This is an example.

We did everything together, you know. It was one of those close friendships where we were friends because our Moms were friends. Yeah—it went back

pretty far. So, we came to college and we roomed together. Everyone says don't

room with your best friend. I think I should've listened [sigh]. It's like we had

plans for our college life. We are in the same major, we have some of the same

classes. In the same clubs, like—we were doing everything together. We were

going through the bid process to be in a sorority, and we wanted to be in the same

sorority. When I say we were B-F-Fs, I really mean that. Well the bid letters came

out and I got into the sorority we both wanted, but she didn't. It's not like I

rubbed it in her face or anything. She cried, and I cried, and the next day she was

not talking to me. She posted stuff on Twitter about me being a backstabber—just

rude stuff. Next thing I know she spoke to the Hall Director telling him things

between us were going to get violent. She moved out. I have tried to reach out to

her, and she just keeps saying on Twitter how one of her followers just needs to

learn that when it's over it's over. So basically—I think I lost my best friend over

something stupid. I see her every day, but we haven't spoken since. It's really

heartbreaking. Just, ugh. (@twinkle_toez, Transcript)

Another account that demonstrated this example is as follows.

We were sorors. Actually we are still sorors. Just because we fell out that don't

mean we don't still talk. We just don't kick it like we used to. If I tell you, I didn't

even know she wanted to run for the N-P-H-C council. I would have had her

back, but I looked at all the bids for the position, and we wanted the same

position—I really thought about dropping out, and people came up to me and told

me that she was posting lies about me on Twitter so other people would vote for

her. You don't understand. She was saying things like, I'm a poser and whatever,

like woo woo this, and woo woo that. [explicative] got real. I guess it didn't

matter though because I won. I lost a friend in the process. But—if she ever needs

anything from me I hope she doesn't hesitate to ask. I can be cordial, but we can't

be friends. (@SimplySassy, Transcription)

Bart (2008) wrote an article which suggested difficulties associated with engaging

in a social media setting. She wrote about an inability for students to remain focused on a

subject for an extended period of time, she mentioned the difficulty to clearly and

concisely communicate with the restrictions on tweet composition, and finally she wrote

about how comments made on Twitter in regards to feedback are seldom constructive.

Given these three examples, and applying those examples to data pulled from the

interview transcripts, it is apparent there is some validation associated with how

interchanges can succumb to negative consequences within an online, social media

context.

Context clues and language. Another piece of the puzzle for this topic stems

from language that is specific to the social media experience. This particular subtheme

was even more fascinating, because there was no scholarly literature that discussed key

terminology that could be presented in this section. Typically, when we think about

context clues within a communication setting, we take into consideration a message, how

the message is intended, how the message is received, nonverbal cues, and environment

(Mayfield, 2011). The data I have gathered throughout this interview process has

disrupted that traditional stance. Instead, focus now has to be pointed toward how

students have transformed context clues (specifically within an online, social media

interchange). This section will emphasize the importance of student voice and the

contribution of this study to the scholarly literature pertaining to social media by focusing on key concepts and terms such as Facebook stalking, subtweeting, hashtagging, and trends, which suggest an emergent lexicon within the social media context—at least among the participants of this study. This terminology is some that found its way in a number of interviews with my participants. Some examples are as follows.

> Um, let's see. Well—I actually do most of my social media stuff on Facebook. I think it's still fun, you know? Like, one of the best things is Facebook stalking all of my classmates at the beginning of each semester. When the class comes live on Blackboard…I'm the person pulling up the class list just to see who I can find. It's fun. Maybe it's kind of weird. Is it weird? I don't know. Don't judge me, okay? (@Buttercup, Transcription)

Another example that illustrated the language that comes along with the social media context was illustrated by this example.

> Yeah like, I'm not even gonna lie. I didn't Twitter before I joined my fraternity. I thought it was stupid, and I thought people who did it were stupid. I just didn't get it. But when I met my bros they were all about that Twitter life. I guess I didn't have to join, but I wanted to be a part of the brotherhood. Everyone made it seem fun so I joined it. Now I'm about that life. We do everything on Twitter, like we can all plan to meet up somewhere, we can plan to eat out, or go to a party. Dude we even have our own hashtag. It's like a secret code for us. We'll be at a party or somethin' and if a girl slips us the look we tweet hashtag she wants the d. We all know what that means. (@Fratlife69, Transcription)

These examples demonstrated the importance of a reality being heavily influenced by social media.

According to Twitter (2012) there are ways for social media users to make the most of their online thoughts. This is especially important when it comes to using a site such as Twitter, which places a limitation on the number of characters one has to get a point across. Twitter is set up in this way to force users into communicating only what is fundamental—at least theoretically. Twitter is a social media site that was designed to encourage its users to post with brevity. The idea was to create a platform in which social media users would be forced to communicate a thought or an idea in 140 characters or less. Interestingly enough, this design has not stopped traditional age college students from sharing their thoughts within an online setting.

Throughout the interview process, the participants used key terminology to aid in communicating their experiences with social media. When it comes to context clues in general, emphasis was placed on subtweeting, hashtagging, and trends.

Subtweeting. Subtweeting was explained as a practice in which someone directs a statement towards someone without mentioning his or her name. One of the participants provided this example as a definition:

> You don't know what subtweeting is? Well—it's basically like—I got it. Imagine you are at a concert at a large auditorium in a big city, okay? The person on the stage is so popular that every ticket is sold out; the place is packed. Let's say you know the person performing on stage, but you really don't know anyone else there, and all of a sudden the person on stage shares something about you like, someone in the audience has smelly feet. All of a sudden you just know they are

talking about you, and that's not the worst part. The worst part is—the thousands

of people there at the concert—you think they know the person on stage is taking

about you. You start to feel called out and self-conscious. That's what

subtweeting is. (@Jagger, Transcription)

The participant continued to communicate that often times subtweets are generalizable

for other people to know what's going on in any given situation.

Hashtagging. Twitter (2012) defines hashtag as a way to categorize tweets or as a

way to find similarly themed tweets. One of the participants described hashtagging by

using this example.

Hashtags are unique to Twitter although you can be walking to class and hear

someone say, oh my God I'm so hungry. Then they'll say, hashtag not cool. Yeah.

People can obnoxious with it, but basically it's a filing system for tweets. I

hashtag a lot when I am watching movies or TV shows because that way

everything I tweet about that movie or TV show gets added to a thread essentially.

Another way to look at hashtagging is like an online discussion. Yeah, like I said,

it can be done tastefully or tackily (@sunshine, Transcription)

Participants mentioned how hashtags are valuable because they reveal a certain level of

interest on the behalf of Twitter users. On the flip side, hashtags have a negative

perception as well. Participants mentioned unnecessary hashtagging on behalf of other

social media users, and they also referenced how this practice has started to bleed into

everyday life.

Hashtagging within the Twitter context makes sense, because it was designed to

be used to categorize tweets. However, participants mentioned how hashtagging has

made its way to other social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and text messaging. In addition, hashtagging is starting to become integrated into everyday conversations, and the consensus at this point is that it is socially acceptable because everyone else is doing it. This practice (amongst others) is a great way to characterize other common trends dictated by social media experiences.

Hashtagging often leads to trends, which impact our daily lives. The students who participated in this study talked about certain hashtags such as: smh (shaking my head), lbvs (let's be very serious), and yolo (you only live once) amongst others. Given it has the most popularity at this time as far as trends is concerned, attributing attention to yolo is perhaps best for this section. In an article published by The Washington Post, Judkis (2012) focused on yolo and the implication is has specifically within an undergraduate student context. Judkis wrote about how yolo is often used as an excuse for bad or risky behavior. An example provided within the article referenced a tweet in which a student posted: "switching seats while the car is goin 100+ #yolo" (para. 4) The students who participated in this study mentioned having an awareness of the poor life choices associated with certain trends, but they also mentioned participating in those trends as well.

Facebook stalking. One of the final focal points within this section pertains to the term Facebook stalking. According to the data gathered from the student participants, this act refers to the viewing of someone's Facebook profile to figure out information without that person having any kind of awareness. Usually the person on the receiving end of Facebook stalking is not connected to the person doing the Facebook stalking. In interviews in which Facebook stalking was mentioned, the participants were asked about

why this occurred. Those participants mentioned Facebook stalking was beneficial in that it allows one to gain an understanding of minor details about a person without the hassle of asking a great deal of questions. In other words, Facebook stalking is another way to reduce uncertainty about another individual. One participant stated.

> I do it because I'm a RA. I've got no shame. I think it can be done in a way that's not creepy, like honestly. People just say Facebook stalking because that's what everyone calls it, but it's beneficial. This is my second year as a RA and its helpful for me to check up on people so I can get a sense of what my community is gonna be like. People have a lot of stuff on Facebook, you know. And the more I can learn about people, the quicker I can know who they are. So for me, yeah. Facebook stalking can be awkward, but I see the point of it if it's used correctly. (@SimplySassy, Transcription)

In addition, there was another participant who viewed Facebook stalking in this way.

> It's okay if that's what people do, but it's obvious. I mean—like seriously. This one time I was talking to this girl one of my friends introduced me to, and you know how you just feel like somebody knows more about you than you know about them? I got that feeling especially when she told me I had on the same outfit she saw me in in a picture on Facebook. It was one of those awkward turtle moments. I knew she creeped on my profile. I don't do it. I used to do it, but now I'm just like if you wanna know something about someone go up and have a convo with 'em. You'll learn a lot more. (@Jagger, Transcription)

One of my favorite examples of Facebook tweeting came from this participant response.

I Facebook creep when I'm bored, like I'll be in class and I'll randomly choose somebody in there to profile stalk. I do Facebook basically, because even though I think people put more stuff on Twitter, they most like lock their Twitter. Facebook stalking is entertaining. This one time I Facebook stalked a girl in my class because she wasn't there. One of her friends told the prof she was out sick and I was thinking to myself, bull[explicative]. So anyway I checked up on her and she posted some pictures of her and her friends getting ready for a party. Looked like somebody's 21st. Long story short, they were hot and I was jealous. I got through class looking through all her pictures. I ended up friending her on Facebook. She accepted. I knew she would. (@Fratlife69, Transcript)

In a final example of Facebook stalking, one of the participants mentioned looking for the presence of his teachers on social media sites. He stated, "I looked at one of my teacher's [Facebook page] and saw that she was a wild woman. I respected her after that" (@the_Godfather313, Transcription). This example stood out to me, because it exemplified how Facebook stalking allows people to gain insight into the lives of others to which they may not otherwise have access.

Development

The second major theme in which subthemes have been organized is development. This is an essential categorization because the responses students revealed through the interview process have shown me that there is some development taking place within the context of social media. One example came from a student who demonstrated development through observing others.

I just thought just because I was in a fraternity that didn't mean I had to act like

my brothers. They liked things like getting drunk and partying, and don't think I

won't defend my brothers to hell and back. I'm just not that guy. I remember we

got investigated by the police because they stole a sign from one of the parking

lots. You know how the police found out about it? You probably guessed it. One

of them posted it on Twitter. I was like dude what the hell? And I got angry

because my reputation was on the line because of his stupidity. You can probably

guess I don't spend that much time at the fraternity house anymore. (@bromeo,

Transcription)

Another aspect of development I was able to pick out from the participants came from

one account based on the following experience.

You know—I do have one more thing to share. This story is so embarrassing and

the more I tell it the more I wish I could just stop myself. Like, I was interviewing

for a job when I was in high school. Well it was more like a internship, but

whatever. So the man who interviewed me was gorgeous. He was very attractive

for an older man. I found myself staring at his eyes, ugh—the more I think about

it the more creepy it is. So like, thought I did a good job and stuff, and when the

interview was over I pulled out my phone to call my mom, you know. Because

I'm all crazy I got sidetracked and I ended up posting a tweet. I will never forget

this tweet. I tweeted, interview done. I'd have his babies in a heartbeat. Long

story short, I realized after I tweeted it that it was probably a bad idea. Before I

could delete it though my phone died. I live like thirty minutes or so from there.

By the time I got home to put my phone on charge it was too late. I got an email

from him with a rejection letter and in the letter he had a screenshot of the tweet. I

was mortified. (@elle_woods, Transcription)

The traditional sense of student development does not take into account exchanges

students have within a virtual or social media contexts; however, based on the responses

of the participants there is evidence that suggests that development is taking place—a

form of development that appeared to correlate with an overall development of one's

sense of self. For this section in particular, attention will be directed towards separation

and disconnect, and ownership and self-assessment.

Some of the literature in Chapter Two of this thesis focused on this idea of

"perceptual development" and how one's sense of identity is influenced based on the

perceptions of others (Iftody et al., 2012, p. 539). Whereas some of the participants did

acknowledge there was some interplay between their offline and their online version of

self, there was also a sense that online behavior was not indicative of offline behavior

because the two are often perceived as exclusive.

Separation and disconnect. In Chapter Two, there was a section that focused on

anonymity, as it is often associated with social media experiences. This section of the

literature review has some bearing on the student social media experience, because

students have the ability to cater their online version of self as whomever they want to be

perceived. Participant responses demonstrated a sense of online uniqueness, and I was

able to connect this thread through the majority of the interviews. In addition, as a

follow-up component to the interview, participants' names were entered into social media

sites (only to see if their names would come up). Most participants had pseudonyms that

prevented them from being found. Whether or not this involved intentionality on their behalf is left to be determined.

One participant account stands out for this section. The student mentioned how a social media context was just that. The participant stated how social media provided an environment for a stream of consciousness—things that would not normally be verbalized would find their way on Facebook or Twitter in particular.

> People constantly make a big deal out of it, but it belongs to the person. Like, my Facebook belongs to me. My Twitter belongs to me. That type of thing. If I got something to say, then I'm gonna say it and that's that. People blow things out of proportion. If you don't like what I got to say, then don't be on my social media pages. That's how I feel. People are just too aware sometimes. (@Mr_Mister, Transcription)

The idea was that while social media provided an outlet for passing thoughts, it should not be associated with the person posting those thoughts. In fact, many participants at some point in time in the interview setting mentioned that people should not judge them based on things they see posted on their social media sites. Some examples of this are as follows.

> If you're going to judge me based on what you see on Twitter I think you should holla back. I'm for real, like what does my Twitter page have to do with who I am as a person? Social media is supposed to be fun and people always have more than one side. Like, there's a professional you and a fun you. Twitter and Facebook—that's the fun me. Not everyone is going to see that. I'll always be that

way. That's a part of me, but it is not who I am. Does that make sense?

(@powder_pink, Transcription)

Another example was based on a participant's response.

I'm like always on social media. I Tweet and I Facebook and people know I do

crazy things because they'll see my pictures and tweets and stuff, but that's not

who I am. I am a son and a brother. I am a dancer and I am a hardworking

student. Just because on Twitter or Facebook that's doesn't always mean it is a

hundred percent. And I know people judge me, but that's before they get the

chance to know me. And if you, and by you I don't really mean you, but like—

you know, people. If they don't like me on social media and they don't even try to

know the person in the profile, it sucks to be them. Their loss, not mines.

(@partyRox, Transcription)

This thought process in and of itself was indicative of the idea that students are aware of

multiple iterations of themselves, but they do not always see a connection between those

versions of self.

Ownership and self-assessment. One of the final subthemes constructed from

the data was ownership and self-assessment. This is a subtheme developed from my own

reflexive processes as both the researcher and an avid social media user as well as the

interviews with participants. Emphasis on ownership ties into the aforementioned theme

of separation and disconnect. Ownership approached the social media experiences of

students in a different way. For example, based on observations of students (participants

as well as non-participants), it became apparent that although students were not

forthcoming with information posted on their social media site, once something

controversial or problematic is confronted, they defended it. Case and point: a non-participant called the police because that student claimed harassment coming from another student. Once the police were involved, they confronted the student perpetuating the harassment and the claim was initially denied. However, the introduction of photo evidence caused the student to admit to what was posted online, but the student did not feel as though anything was wrong. Being a graduate Hall Director, this is a scenario that was brought to me by one of the students who currently lives in my community. Here is another example from one of the participants.

> My chapter has a reputation on this campus. We know it. The school knows it. Everybody knows it. Like—all of my bros have ended up on that [institution removed] make out page on Twitter. You now what I'm talking about? Well anyway, I got dared to steal a sign from one from one of the games. I basically got away with it but some people too a picture of me with the sign in our chapter house. It was stupid, 'cause I would have gotten away with it the picture hadn't gone viral. But anyway, my whole chapter was about to be punished for it, since they only saw my chin and my shirt with our letters on it. I admitted to it. I did the crime, and I did the time. I learned my lesson. Next time I take something from the university I won't put it online. (@Fratlife69, transcription)

Another example was found in this participant response.

> For the most part I try to keep my personal beliefs off social media. But there was a time I probably had a little bit too much to drink, and I thought I was texting some buried emotions to a guy. Well, turns out I ended up posting all my emotions on Facebook and on Twitter. It was so bad—to make it worse, I didn't

realize it until the next day. My boyfriend found out a lot of stuff about me that I did not want him to know. I cried so hard, because it hurt him. There was nothing I could do. All of my business was there for people to see. People hated me so much. I just didn't even know what to do, like—I deactivated my social media for a little while. There was a lot of damage control that had to be done, but it had to be done, I guess. Now that I have made it through, I would not have done it any different. That relationship was not meant for long term anyway, and it showed me who my true friends were. (@twinkle_toez, transcription)

The scenario of ownership and taking responsibility for one's online actions is critical because of the self-assessment component associated with online manifestation of self and the implications it has for interactions with other people. The participants in the study mentioned being in a position in which they typically do not monitor what they post in an online social media context, however those participants also mentioned being aware of content other students post online within the same context. Essentially, students are able to recognize when something posted on social media should not be there if someone else has posted it. They are unable to determine whether or not what they have posted it the most appropriate. An example from one participant further identified this concept.

It's like I can recognize the dumb stuff I put on Facebook and Twitter when other people put dumb stuff on there, like—I remember getting heated when this girl on my floor posted selfies of herself in the bathroom mirrors every single day. I always thought it was dumb and she did the duck lips with it—basically it was not cute. I complained about it to anyone who would listen, and one day somebody

commented on one of my pictures, like—selfie much? Then I was able to

recognize I hated on this girl for doing the same types of things I was doing. It

was so dumb. But now I know better so I do better. But at least in my defense I

never did a selfie in the bathroom mirror. That is so trashy, like for real.

(@Ladybug10, transcription)

Additionally, another participant shared a great example.

Social media basically showed me that it is easy for me to identify the things I

dislike about myself when other people do it. I hate it when people tweet things

for no reason, like it really bothers me. Especially those people who tweet

pictures of their food. God—I hate that. But if you look at most of my twitpics or

my Instagram a lot of my pictures are of things I east when I go out to restaurants

with my friends. I think everybody is like that, you know. Like—I really believe

we dislike things about other people we don't like about our self. It's just easier to

pick it out in other people. (@Mr_Mister, transcription)

Dunning, Heath, and Suls (2004) wrote about implications of flawed self-

assessment and the impact it has on perception versus reality. The authors stated this is

the reality because self-assessment or self-insight is often cushioned with modest

knowledge. In addition, "complete strangers armed with only scant information about an

individual can predict that person's skills and abilities" (Dunning et. al., p. 71). What this

means is that the ability for the participants to make generalizations about other students

based on what they see in an online context is natural. However, it is also natural that the

participants are unable to successfully assess their own online behavior, even if it

correlates with that of students to who they attribute harsh criticism.

Discussion and Theory Development

This study examined the experiences of 17 traditional aged college undergraduate students at a Midwestern university as it pertained to social media. Through a literature review as well as through data collected through the interviews, there were some important themes developed. Those major thematic categories were communication and development. Based on the findings of this study, the answer to the research question that drove this study could be addressed. Additionally, based on the study's findings, a new theory was developed to further explain traditional aged undergraduate college students' experiences with social media. The theory was termed the Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence.

Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence

The Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence is a theory grounded in the data collected throughout this study in which I sought to ultimately theorize about how traditional aged undergraduate college students describe their experiences with social media. By observing the student accounts of their experiences with social media in the form of interview transcripts, by considering the themes and nested subthemes developed and teased out in the data analysis process, and by reviewing the literature surrounding the subject, it is apparent that the Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence is an effective tool or mental model to discuss student experiences as they pertain to social media. The theory can be stated as such: One's online sense of self is derived from experiences with specialized social media language, interactions, and one's understanding of other-user perception. This online sense of self, while often differentiated from the everyday self, often does influence the everyday version of self.

The Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence was derived from the perceived influence social media had on language and development, based on the responses of the research participants. One overarching theory was generated from the entire set of findings from this study. In this constructivist grounded theory research, an argument can be made for two separate theories constructed from the data: the theory of social media literacy and the theory of social media influence on identity development. I made the decision to analyze one theory that contained both components because I did not think the each separate component was well-developed enough to support multiple theories grounded in the data.

The first aspect of the theory focused on the use of language. Chomsky (1972) wrote about language as a unique human characteristic. In his universal grammar theory in linguistics, Chomsky stated one of the components involved with the development of language was influenced by a series of external forces. The realm of social media served as an external force impacting what I have termed as social media literacy. Based on my interactions with the participants, I made the observation that language usage was transformed based on the incorporation of terminology specific to social media usage. Here is a salient example.

> People use it in everyday speaking, like O-M-G did you hear what he just said about everybody passing the test? Hashtag winning. You know, stuff like that. It's basically like we all do it because we know what it means. I've even heard people in class say stuff like RT meaning retweet instead of using the word ditto. It's kind of cool. (@elle_woods, Transcription)

Hockenson (2012) explained the "satisfaction" associated with breaking down a "five-word phrase to a five letter word" (para. 2). This concept pertained to the development of language specifically as it pertains to the millennial generation. As demonstrated by the participant account above, it is obvious social media as an external force had already begun to influence language.

In *The Complete Guide to Twitter's Language and Acronyms* by Hockenson (2012) it was written that social media language derived from "finite abbreviations and techniques" used to enhance the incorporation and readability aspect of social media (para. 2). Given what Chomskey (1972) stated about the influence of outside technologies on language acquisition, and I argued the Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence further explained that concept. To further illustrate this, I wrote the following within one of my analytic memos.

> Today I am thinking about how social media alters everyday living. This was triggered when one of my students told me that nothing is official unless it is on Facebook. Initially it was a comment I dismissed; however, I question the legitimacy behind this account. Reflecting on my experience in general, I remember being eager to update my relationship status on Facebook. It's not like it was something I rushed to do but I was looking forward to it nonetheless. Additionally, I went to a wedding and the couple updated their relationship status to married before the ceremony concluded. I thought it was crazy, but clearly this would affirm my student's statement that nothing is official until it is one Facebook. (analytic memo)

The immediate examples of how social media has altered the way people in the millennial generation speak, and how they understand one another, has reinforced the component of the Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence specifically as it pertains to language.

One final aspect as it pertained to the language component of the theory revolves around the premise that language is a construction that has to be understood (Goldberg, 2003). In other words in order for spoken dialogue to be considered language, it has to be both perceived and understood. Goldberg (2003) wrote, "the inventory of constructions, which includes morphemes or words, idioms, partially lexically filled and fully abstract phrasal pattern is understood to be learned" (p. 223). I interpreted this to be a statement that supports my theoretical claim for social media based language. Not only do students of the millennial generation use language influenced by social media, but they are able to understand the language as well.

The second aspect of the theory focused on identity influence. In Chapter Two of this research one of the areas of focus was digital identity development. A key phrase from that section was. "perceptual experience is conditioned by how we believe others perceive us, and in this interplay of perceptions, we develop the ability to imagine other minds" (Iftody et al,, 2010, p. 539). This concept was demonstrated in a few responses from the research participants.

> Yep. That's what I said. It's fun you know. And people like what I have to say. People follow me all the time. People favorite my tweets. I'm constantly getting retweeted by people. I even have a few celebrity responses under my belt. I'm like a Twitter celebrity. (@the_Godfather313, Transcription)

This is another example.

> Yeah. I see. Well I think with my personal Twitter account I am aware that other people look at my page. So the things I share are more mature and professional. Like I may see an article from the New York Times online and I'll retweet the article. That's what other people in the field do. I retweet breaking news and stuff like that. You know it's really important to keep up appearances, like another thing I do for example is I will retweet things from leaders or icons in my field. You better believe if Oprah tweets something I am going to retweet it! I also do things like follow other reporters, like Anderson Cooper—that man is so attractive. I'm sorry that was not necessary but you know how that goes. Um, what was I saying? (@SimplySassy, Transcription)

These examples highlighted some considerations that factor into identity components that are influenced by social media.

To further illustrate this concept, I turned to Goffman's Dramaturgical model (1959). Goffman wrote about how one's identity was essentially a play carried out over the course of a lifetime. His model consisted of a series of performances, and one's version of his or her self was based on other individual perceptions, which determined a set of "attributes" (Goffman, p. 17) that person is assumed to posess. Not only was this evident in the participant interviews, but this also helped to explain how social media influences identity.

Research Question

In terms of responding to the research question: How do traditional-age undergraduate students describe their experiences with social media?, based on my analysis of the findings of this study, I suggest that student's experiences as involved, complex, rewarding, and enjoyable. It is involved in the sense that social media is integrated into most aspects of their lives. Student participants discussed having many ways to access social media on a daily basis. Additionally, based off their experiences, participants described complex situations surrounding relationship forming and relationship desist. Students have an awareness of how social media influences their lives, however that ultimately does not take away from the fact that overall social media is seen as an enjoyable experience.

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Summary

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For this research project to determine how traditional age undergraduate students describe their experiences with social media, 17 students were interviewed. The interviews lasted between 40 to 55 minutes, and each interview was transcribed and coded for thematic and subthematic development. For this chapter, the nested subthemes were: conflict and misunderstanding, context clues and language, separation and disconnect, and ownership and self-assessment. Each nested subtheme was either placed in the theme of communication or development. The analysis of data ultimately led to the development of the Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Traditional aged undergraduate college students described their experiences with social media in a number of ways. Based on the interview accounts of the participants, those experiences can be positive or negative, they can be uplifting or hurtful, and they can be memorable. One thing that is for certain is students will continue to have the types of experiences that will transform a variety of functions. One major concept to take away from this research study is: communication is changing as a result of social media. There is currently no communication method or model that explains how social media should be integrated. Another major take-away concept is: student experiences through social media will continue to impact various aspects of life such as person to person interactions and other developmental life components.

To reiterate, the first theme derived from the data of this study was communication. This theme was developed based on the stories and experiences of the participants through conflict and misunderstanding and context clues and language. The second major theme in which subthemes have been organized is development. This was an essential categorization because the responses students revealed through the interview process have shown me that there is some development taking place within the context of social media.

Implications

This research proved to be necessary—particularly within higher education—because it provided examples that indicated the necessity of reevaluating current standards of traditionally accepted student development theories. With the advent of social media, I have shown there are developmental factors impacting our students that are not present in the current literature. In addition, this study contains a literature review that could be beneficial to institutions of higher education as they move towards changing policies to include guidelines for social media behavior on college and university campuses.

Most college and university policies lag behind the social media trend. One of the discussion points that has surrounded policy reform within these contexts has to deal with how to change policies to include guidelines for social media. On one hand, conversations have surrounded adding an addendum to university policies that will serve as an overarching social media policy. Based on the information I've gathered for this research study, my perception is that going this route puts no limitations on college and university personnel's authority when it comes to social media. As referenced in Chapter One, the resulting circumstance could potentially be a situation similar to the Rice (2011) article, in which university personnel requested access to student social media accounts to monitor posts about the university.

The more preferred route for policy reform within a college or university contexts would be for institutions to adopt a comprehensive social media policy that is interwoven throughout the policy. The benefit of this method would be having departments across the campus all on the same page. Additionally, procedures can be developed to assist in

processing through scenarios carried out through social media environments. Specifically, I can see a benefit in a comprehensive social media policy for judicial purposes. In my role as an Assistant Hall Director, there are scenarios that require me to be very creative in interpreting current existing policies to address social media-related situations.

One final implication this research has is for anyone who works in higher education. Based on the data and the theory, we have to change our frame of reference when it comes to interacting with millennial students. We have to change our tactics to include social media, so that engaging students becomes engaging students within a social media context. My initial thought process led me to believe this was only a topic that impacted Student Affairs professionals, but I have realized this impacts faculty members in Academic Affairs as well.

For Student Affairs in particular, having an awareness of how traditional-aged undergraduate students describe their experiences with social media is necessary, because social media contexts provide another space in which students interact. The result of this impacts the way students connect, it impacts the way students coexist, and it also impacts the way students work through problems. In my experience, I have seen undergraduate students who lack the ability to communicate in a face-to-face context, and those types of students frequently request meetings with residence hall staff to request room switches simply because they feel nothing else can be done about their living situation. However, navigating their social media pages often provide a deeper level of understanding as to why their living situation might be hostile. I wrote the following in one of my analytic memo.

I had a great conversation with one of my colleagues about some of the issues we

are noticing in the halls. She mentioned being frustrated about students not being

able to talk through their problems with one another. Our conversation shifted to

how this is further impacted by social media. She told me she wished social media

was banned from the residence halls. I thought this was interesting considering I

know she is not an avid social media user. I talked about the benefit of social

media presence, and she made a great observation; she asked why our policies did

not allow us to follow-up with students based on things we see online.

Considering the nature of my research, I figured this was something worth

explaining more. Speaking of personal experiences, there have been some cases in

which I have followed up with students based on information I saw posted online.

But now I'm wondering, was that ethical? Would I have had the support of my

department or of the university of the students complained about me reviewing

their social media pages? (analytic memo)

Reflecting on the questions I posed in this memo, there is value in Student Affairs

professionals collaborating to create policy reform that will allow for expanded student

interaction based on information posted in social media contexts.

In addition to Student Affairs professionals, there is value in faculty and staff in

Academic Affairs having an awareness of how traditional-age undergraduate students

describe their experiences with social media. One common perception is there is a

correlation between student procrastination because of social media and student academic

success. Whereas I am not denying there is potentially truth in that regard, it is important

to recognize this perception potentially exists because faculty and staff have no

familiarity with regard to social media contexts. I recall being an undergraduate student, and visiting multiple professors during their office hours to ask questions or to request general guidance. It was apparent to me my professors cared about what was going on in my life, and I know they wanted me to be successful, but it needed to happen on their terms; meaning I needed to be in class or I needed to visit during office hours. I believe this mindset must be altered for current undergraduate students.

Academic faculty and staff should seek to have some familiarity with social media because it is a method for them to get to know their students in a way they may not otherwise know them. I think current traditional-age undergraduate students do not see the value in going to meet with their professors outside of the classroom. It is something they view as being a waste of time, and sometimes they are just intimidated by what the interaction could potentially yield. However, I am fairly positive students will post whatever issues they have with a class online. Because students are not likely to bring their problems or concerns to their professors, perhaps becoming more familiarized with social media will allow academic faculty and staff to meet their students half way.

I personally enjoy connecting with students via various forms of social media. I recognize this is a personal passion of mine, and in no way am I trying to make the case that Student and Academic Affairs professionals must use social media to connect with students, but I do think having some familiarity with it will allow for a more enriching working experience. Additionally, there is value in adapting to advancing technological and communication platforms so we can connect with students in a different way; in a way that allows us to meet our students where they are comfortable and familiar.

Additionally, there is value in having a working knowledge of social media, because the more we chose to distance ourselves from this phenomenon the wider the gap of communication becomes between us and students in the millennial generation. This is particularly interesting to me, a member of the millennial generation, because my interaction with the research participants showed me that I have a lot of learning to do as it pertains to social media. What makes this more interesting is that I consider myself to be social media savvy, however if I do not use it in the same way as students who may share similar experiences to those of my research participants, then I still have room to grow.

Self-Implications

After completing this research, I have a heightened sense of awareness as it pertains to social media presence. I would say, prior to the study, my perception of my social media presence was a good mixture between professional and social. My understanding is that my personal and my professional self are one in the same. After completing the research, my perception has slightly changed. I notice I, too, have moments in which I turn to the twitterverse to share frustrations I may have at any given moment. A perfect example would be a time during which I was frustrated about a student interaction I had in a judicial setting, and I ended up subtweeting about that experience. What I have come to realize is that my professional sense of self and my personal sense of self are two entities, and I am not that different from my research participants as far as how I use social media is concerned.

Another thing I have learned about myself is that I have to become willing to learn about other ways in which social media is used. From the start of my research until

now, I have given a few presentations about professionalism and social media. Some of the information I have presented to various audiences is self-collected data based on my likes and dislikes. What I have realized is I am wired to believe that people other than myself inherently do social media the wrong way. My most recent social media presentation went well; however based on some of the feedback I received a few people who were present in the session commented I should not just focus on what people should not do within a social media context. Between that feedback and this presentation, I have ideas on how I will structure future presentations I do surrounding social media.

One of the final self-implications I have based on this study has to deal with the direction of any future research. I am proud of the research I've done for this research project; however I know this is only surface-level for all that is left to be uncovered. I am proud of my work, but for the next phase of my research I would like to see emphasis placed on more development of the Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence. My goal is to one day have my theory incorporated in various texts used across multiple academic disciplines.

Limitations

This study was meant to generate theory as it pertains to traditional aged undergraduate students describing their experiences with social media. There were several limitations that should be considered. First, the sample used for this research was limited. The inclusion criteria for the present study elicited traditional aged undergraduate college students. Additionally, whereas living on campus was not a requirement to participate in this study, each participant lived in on campus housing. Second, the participants in used for this research were all from one Midwestern public research

institution. For experience variation, future accounts of this research should take into consideration different kinds of students at different types of universities, all across the United States. Additionally, to reach a larger number of students and gather a substantial amount of data, future research should rely on a mixed methods approach.

Recommendations

For myself, and others who are interested in furthering this study, there is value in focusing on the self-assessment piece of participant experiences with social media. Although this was something that came as a result of my coding, it was not something I necessarily focused on during the interviewing process. This is necessary for bridging the gap between current development and communication theory with the Theory of Social Media Literacy and Identity Influence. Also, self-assessment will more than likely cause the participants to focus more on their stories, and to open up a little more about their experiences.

In terms of interviewing, I would recommend that more emphasis be placed on gathering a variety of participants. Because of my position I was able to secure a substantial number of interviews with a variety of students, but all of those students resided in on campus housing. For future iterations of this research project more emphasis should be placed on getting perspectives of students who live off campus, in addition to students who attend different kinds of higher education institutions. Some additional research questions to consider may be:

- How do students at community colleges describe their experiences with social media?

- How do students at private universities describe their experiences with social media?

- How do women experience social media differently than men experience it?

- What are implications of social media experience based on race or ethnicity?

These questions are essential to isolate certain variable that may reveal additional data surrounding how social media is used.

Summary

This research is essential for Student and Academic Affairs professionals in particular because it provides insight into how traditional-age students described their experiences with social media. In addition, this chapter provided insight which suggested the benefits associated with at least becoming familiarized with social media sites in order to enhance connections and relationships with undergraduate students. Last but not least, this chapter highlighted some limitations of the study and offered recommendations about what could be done to enhance future studies surrounding the topic.

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APPENDIX A

IRB EXEMPT STATUS

Institutional Review Board

DATE: October 2, 2012

TO: Kenneth Horne, B.A.

FROM: Ball State University IRB

RE: IRB protocol # 375210-1

TITLE: How do traditional undergraduate college students describe their experiences with social media?

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: October 2, 2012

The Institutional Review Board reviewed your protocol on October 2, 2012 and has determined the procedures you have proposed are appropriate for exemption under the federal regulations. As such, there will be no further review of your protocol, and you are cleared to proceed with the procedures outlined in your protocol. As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record.

Editorial notes:

a. Approved- Exempt
b. Informed Consent Required

While your project does not require continuing review, it is the responsibility of the P.I. (and, if applicable, faculty supervisor) to inform the IRB if the procedures presented in this protocol are to be modified or if problems related to human research participants arise in connection with this project. **Any procedural modifications must be evaluated by the IRB before being implemented, as some modifications may change the review status of this project.** Please contact please contact John Mulcahy at (765) 285-5106 or jmulcahy@bsu.edu if you are unsure whether your proposed modification requires review or have any questions. Proposed modifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to the IRB (http://www.bsu.edu/irb) for review. Please reference the above IRB protocol number in any communication to the IRB regarding this project.

Reminder: Even though your study is exempt from the relevant federal regulations of the Common Rule (45 CFR 46, subpart A), you and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your project.

Appendix B

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

A. Introduction

Thank you for meeting with me today. This study is being conducted to better understand how undergraduate college students describe their experiences with social media. Because your personal experiences are so important in this study, I hope you will be as honest and open in your responses as possible. You are encouraged to provide personal experiences and stories throughout this interview, as this information will be used to better understand how undergraduate college students describe their experiences with social media.

Before beginning, I would like to inform you of your rights as a research participant. Your identity will remain completely confidential and will not be revealed in any published material and any other names mentioned during the course of the interview will also be labeled with pseudonyms. You may choose to refrain from answering any of the following questions and you reserve the right to withdraw from this study at any time and for any reason.

Additionally, your answers will be utilized in drawing conclusions for this study and they may be presented in published material. To ensure that I record your answers accurately, I would like to ask your permission to record this interview. The recording will remain solely in my possession, and no other person will know you participated in this study.

- Do I have your permission to record this interview?

- Have you been able to review the Informed Consent Form I provided to you earlier? Do you have any questions about this document?

I have prepared a list of questions to help guide our conversation, but please do not hesitate to share any stories or experiences you feel may be relevant. We will talk about your experiences as a student who uses social.

- Do you have any questions before we begin?

B. Background Information

I would like to begin by getting to know a little more information about you as a student

1. How long have you been a student at [institution removed]?

2. What is your major?

3. What are some activities and organizations in which you are involved?

   o Probe- what leadership roles would you say you fulfill?

C. Transition/Incorporation

Next let's talk about your knowledge about social media and how you engage with it.

4. What comes to mind when you hear the term "social media"?

5. Which social media sites do you use? How long have you used them?

6. Why do you use the sites that you use?

7. How would you describe your skill level at navigating various social media sites?

8. Are there social media sites that you may have used in the past that you no longer use? What contributed to your decision to leave those sites?

9. How do you think things would be social media sites did not exist?

10. How would you adjust if the social media sites you frequented were shut down?

D. Technology and social media

For this portion of the interview I am interested in learning more about the means through which you access different social media sites.

11. There is a variety of research being done that defines your generation as being constantly connected. Do you think this applies to you? Why? Why Not?

12. Technology such as tablets, laptops, and smartphones often increase college student presence on social media sites. How would you describe whether or not this is valid? How does this statement apply to you?

    o Probe—what kinds of technology do you use to access your social media sites?

13. If you did not have the technological devices that you have, how do you think that would impact your social media usage?

14. What would you say are some advantages of constantly being plugged in to social media sites? What are some disadvantages?

15. How do you think social media has impacted your college experience so far?

    o Probe—do you find yourself using it more in college than you did previously?

E. Conclusion

16. Is there anything else you would like to add about how you would describe your experiences with social media?

Thank you very much for taking time to discuss your experiences with me. This interview has greatly contributed to my understanding of how undergraduate college students describe their experiences with social media.

Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Study Title
How do traditional undergraduate college students describe their experiences with social media?

Study Purpose and Rationale
The purpose of this study is to conceptualize how college undergraduate students utilize social media. One of the primary focuses will be to gain student perspective to contribute to the growing research that currently exists. One of the most important aspects of this research is that it is going to introduce the student perspective into the research that exists about social media.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria
I am interested in interviewing traditional undergraduate college students (age 18-24) who use various forms of social media, specifically: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Participants who do not adhere to the research protocol or participants who communicate they no longer want to take part in the study

Audio or Video Tapes
The interviews will be recording using a handheld digital recording device.

Data Confidentiality or Anonymity
Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and places or persons they refer to during the interview. Any information regarding the participant's identity will not be recorded

Storage of Data
Upon completion of the study, electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer/flash drive/CD/DVD and physical copies of data will be securely stored in my home location indefinitely because my research will be ongoing throughout my pursuit of a doctoral degree

Risks or Discomfort
There are no foreseeable risks associated with this study

Voluntary Participation
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator prior to signing this form.

IRB Contact Information
For one's rights as a research subject, you may contact the following: Director, Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5052, irb@bsu.edu.

Study Title
How do traditional age undergraduate college students describe their experiences with social media?

Consent
I, _____, agree to participate in this research project entitled, "How do traditional age undergraduate college students describe their experiences with social media?" I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   **Date**

Researcher Contact Information

Principal Investigator   **Faculty Supervisor**
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