

5-23-2019

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[10.15760/honors.764](https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/honors/764)

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Insta-Identity: The Construction of Identity Through Instagram

An Extended Literature Review

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

University Honors

and

Communication

Thesis Adviser

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Portland State University

2019

As a technology-centered society, we consume and make use of communication technology affordances daily. A person's ability to curate, communicate, and perceive their identity through the exploration and sharing of selfhood has never been easier thanks to social media applications that promote user-generated content and encourage self-promotion through computer-mediated communication within a social network. This paper will analyze the role Instagram has in the construction of identity by reviewing existing literature on identity theories, with a focus on communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993), as well as the methodologies behind representing self to see how they apply to the features and frameworks of Instagram.

Instagram is a photo-based social media application that launched in 2010 and has proceeded to be one of the fastest growing social media networks globally, with over 1 billion monthly active users (www.instagram.com). "While no uniformly adopted definition of social media has emerged, the term is used colloquially to describe a set of features and tools that enable peer-to-peer communication in ways not supported by mass media which use a 'one-to-many' broadcast model" (Ellison & Vitak, p.205, 2015). There are a multitude of reasons why Instagram has become so popular among its users. A study from 2016 found the four main motives for using Instagram are surveillance/knowledge about others, documentation, coolness, and creativity (Sheldon, 2016). Another study from 2015 found Instagram users have five primary social and psychological motives: social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escapism, and peeking (Lee, Lee, Moon, & Sung, 2015). All of these motives can be understood as affordances facilitated through the features and frameworks of Instagram. The features and frameworks of Instagram that this review will focus on will include: posts, user profiles, feeds, stories, highlights, hashtags, location services, and paralinguistic digital affordances such as

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liking, sharing, and tagging. This paper will analyze these features and frameworks to see how they afford the construction of identity.

Norman (2013) offers the concept and definition of affordances as “the possible interactions between people and the environment” (p.19). He describes affordances as relationships rather than properties and argues that “the presence of an affordance is jointly determined by the qualities of an object and the abilities of the agent that is interacting” (Norman, p.11, 2013). In other words, an affordance is determined not only by what the object is but also by the person or thing that is interacting with it. When applied to communication technology, perceived affordances are key to how we use technology and how we understand our relationship with it. This paper will specifically use the concept of affordances when looking at how each feature of Instagram affords identity construction to users.

Identity is a complex concept addressed by researchers in various fields of study such as sociology, psychology, anthropology and philosophy. For the purpose of this paper, identity will be defined as a form of communication that is internalized and acted out by an individual as a social behavior (Jung & Hecht, 2004). With increasing advancement of communication technology and social media usage, this research is important for expanding socio-cultural perspectives of identity to include the theoretical digitized stages on which we now perform. By viewing online identity, how an individual presents themselves online, as an integral part of an individual’s holistic identity construction rather than a separate construction of self we then recognize that an individual’s identity can have both fluidity and multiplicity. Furthermore, we recognize this fluidity can exist while still maintaining authenticity and therefore understand the significant role social media platforms like Instagram have in the construction of identity. Additionally, this research could lead to further discussion and studies on how minority groups,

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such as the queer community, use the affordances of social media to construct an identity and concept of selfhood outside of their non-computer-mediated experiences. The aim of this paper is to bring social media platforms such as Instagram to the forefront of current and future discussions of modern-day identity construction and performance.

Literature Review

There are two schools of thought regarding the concept of identity: old school and new school. Old schools of thought view identity as a holistic representation of self with only one true authentic self. Within this old school thought, identity is used as a destination point and as a measure of character alignment. New schools of thought view identity as an ongoing project, multifaceted and fluid in nature. New school thoughts argue that every “self” we encounter is true to that moment, and there is no “true” self to find. This paper will focus on reviewing new schools of thought on identity and analyze how they can be applied to the construction of identity afforded by the features and frameworks of Instagram.

Anyone who uses the internet is actively or passively creating an online identity whether they know it or not (Frunzaru, 2016). Online identity is constructed through the affordances of social media applications like Instagram and is an integral part of an individual’s holistic identity construction and representation of self. It is important to understand how Instagram affords identity construction because “identities distinguish between self and society, individuals and groups, in-groups and out-groups, and they are fundamentally public, ways of being known by others” (Kreiss, 2018, p.15). This affordance is unique to online presentation because of the intentionality it allows, unlike offline presentation (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008). Using the hyperpersonal model of computer-mediated communication, Walther (1966) argues the features of computer-mediated communication allow users to curate a more asynchronous, editable, and

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cue-reduced form of communication which allows for a more selectively constructed self-presentation. This selectively constructed self-presentation is the active curation of an online identity, which contributes to a user's holistic representation of self.

In addition to being able to curate one's identity, the concept of an online identity affords users the ability to portray different selves online (Turkle, 2011). This affordance fosters the idea that a single individual can have multiple identities contributing to their holistic construction and perception of self. "In every day cycles of self-presentation and impression formation, individuals perform on multiple stages, and in doing so, they blend social spheres online that may have been separate offline, thus confusing private and public boundaries" (Papacharissi, p.209, 2018). This blending of online and offline spheres challenges the notion that people have "authentic" identities that are often misrepresented online and is key in recognizing identity as a form of communication afforded by social media applications like Instagram.

Communication theory of identity (CTI) focuses on "mutual influences between identity and communication and conceptualizes identity as communication rather than seeing identity as merely a product of communication or vice versa" (Jung and Hecht, 2004, p. 266). This theory focuses on both the individual and social components of identity and "posits that social relations and roles are internalized by individuals as identities through communication. Individuals' identities, in turn, are acted out as social behavior through communication" (Jung and Hecht, 2004, p.266). Hecht (1993) suggests there are four frames of identity: personal, relational, enacted and communal. This paper will use Hecht's theory to analyze how the features and frameworks of Instagram afford identity construction by looking at how all four frames operate collectively within the features and frameworks of Instagram. In addition to reviewed literature the following three figures will be analyzed:



Figure 1. Nichols, T. (2018). Person lying in bed of plants. [Photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BoxhFFohFbI/>



Figure 2. Nichols, T. (2018). Person wearing wig holding drink [Photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BpnB94Kln2a/>

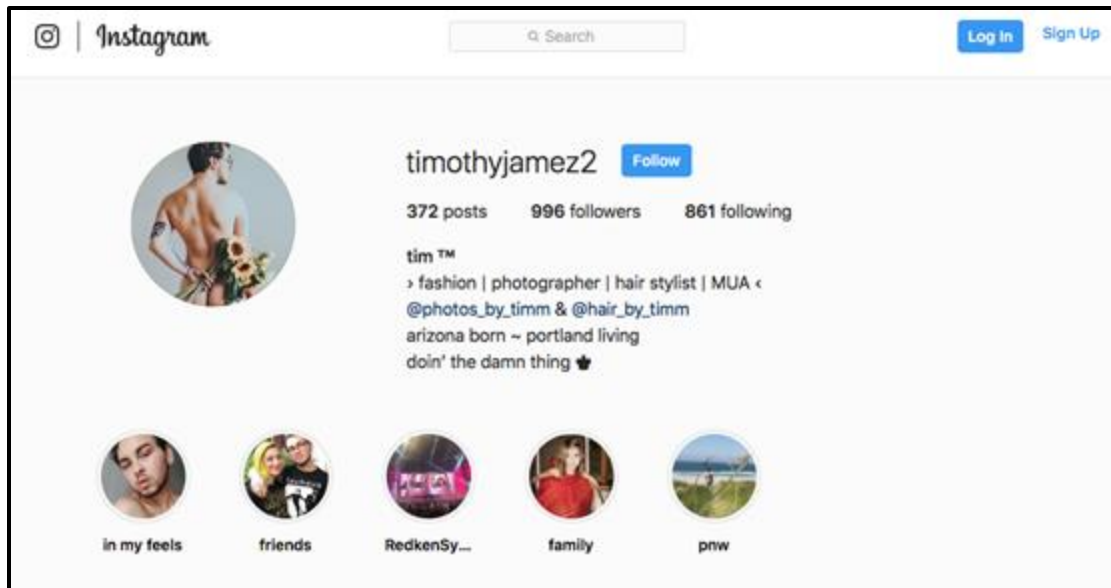


Figure 3. Nichols, T. (2018). Instagram profile. [Photograph]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/timothyjamez2/>

Personal Identity

The first frame of CTI is personal identity, which is an individual's self-concept or self-image (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Instagram stands out among other social media applications such as Facebook or Twitter for its focus on visual content over social networking or news sharing. One of the main features of Instagram is the ability for users to post and share photographs and videos onto their feeds. A feed, in the context of social media, is a term used to describe the list of posted content a user sees. Therefore, when looking at how Instagram affords the construction of personal identity it is important to look at the role of photography in the construction of identity. Van Dijk (2008) argues photography functions as a tool for identity formation when shared. "Networked systems define new presentational contexts of personal pictures as sharing pictures

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become the default mode of this cultural practice. In many ways, digital tools and connective systems increase control over individual's image exposure, granting them more power to present and shape themselves in public" (Van Dijk, 2008, p.71). In other words, sharing photographs affords an individual the ability to visually construct their personal identity. One form of personal photography that is very present and often shared on Instagram is what is known as the "selfie."

A selfie is a "self-generated and self-selected documentation to communicate the transitory message about oneself at a particular moment in time, typically taken with the use of smartphones and webcams for the purpose of immediate distribution to others via social media networks" (Soerjoatmodjo, 2016, p.139). Soerjoatmodjo (2016) argues that selfies afford self-expression and the ability to remember a specific moment in time which links to identity formation. Similarly, Van House (2009) argues by constructing memories through photographs, an individual is constructing a personal narrative and self-understanding both individually and collectively. Shumaker (2017) notes individuals communicate identity largely through appearance. Instagram affords the ability to take a selfie through the readily available camera feature that functions within the Instagram app. A simple swipe right to access the camera or tap of the plus (+) symbol allows an Instagram user to take and share a photograph or video instantly, as well as edit it with various filters and photo settings. This feature affords users the ability to communicate through appearance by allowing them to curate their self-image and construct their personal identity through the photographs and videos they take and choose to post/share on their account.

Furthermore, when an individual "appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which

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it is in his interest to convey” (Goffman, 1955, p.4). In other words, individuals will usually seek out the best light to present themselves in. The ability to selectively curate how one is perceived is a unique affordance of computer-mediated communication that is afforded by capturing and sharing a photograph on Instagram.

In face-to-face communication one cannot control every aspect of their self-presentation whereas there is a lot more control with computer-mediated communication. For example, an individual could capture twenty versions of the same subject in a photograph and then select which version they feel best represents what they are trying to capture. The act of selecting which image to present and share on Instagram affords users the ability to intentionally curate how they want their subject to be perceived, which is not as easy in face-to-face communication. This same concept can be applied to any perceived unfavorable attribute or quality of one’s identity that they selectively wish to not present. Walther, Liang, Deandrea, Tong, Carr, Spottswood, and Amichai-Hamburger (2011) describe this selection process as selective self-presentation, which affords users the ability to exaggerate or diminish the characteristics they do or do not wish to portray online.

Figures 1 and 2 contain several components that contribute to the personal frame of identity. First, there is the curation of images. By posting an image of themselves, a user is communicating how they wish to see themselves as well as how they wish for others to perceive them. In Figure 1 the individual is depicted wearing a belted tan jumpsuit with an oversized red and white dress shirt on top, pictured lying in a bed of plants. They are wearing wire thin glasses and their hand is adorned with a large stone ring. Each of these choices in appearance was curated by this individual and then captured through this image. The act of posting this image to their personal Instagram account reinforces their self-concept and self-image, and therefore

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affords the expression and reflection of their personal identity. In Figure 2 the same individual is pictured wearing a long blonde wig with a black corset and jean jacket. They are also wearing pink eyeshadow and holding a drink. The appearance of this individual in Figure 1 is comparatively different than that of Figure 2 when looking at socially constructed ideas of femininity and masculinity. In Figure 1 this individual is portraying more socially constructed ideas of masculinity with their short hair and oversized clothing. In Figure 2 this individual displays socially constructed ideas of feminine traits with their long blonde hair, wearing of a corset, and makeup. These differences exemplify the fluidity of this user's self-expression, of which is afforded by the ability to post and reaffirm their personal identity through these shared photographs on Instagram.

The second feature of Instagram that contributes to the construction of personal identity is the user profile. The top of an Instagram user's feed features their profile picture, username, provided name, and room for any additional text of their choosing. This is an opportunity for users to personalize the top of their feed and share with others details about themselves. In Figure 3 the user has their name, Tim, with the additional text of "fashion, photographer, hair stylist, and MUA (makeup artist)." From this brief line of text other users are able to deduct several things about Tim's personal identity. For example, the word fashion infers Tim is interested in fashion, and the words "photographer, hair stylist and MUA" suggest what type of professional Tim is. This short bit of information allows Tim to curate how others perceive them. In Figure 3 Tim also decides to include the text, "Arizona born - Portland living." Providing where a user is born and currently lives is not mandatory on Instagram, which means this is information that Tim voluntarily chose to share about their personal identity.

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Lastly, there are “highlights” on the top of users’ feeds, which is a feature of Instagram that allows users to save images or videos from their “story.” Stories are a feature of Instagram that afford users the ability to post and share photos, live video clips, or text that will disappear in 24 hours. Highlights is a feature used to save story content to a user’s profile before it disappears. Users are able to choose if they want to save any of the content from their stories and can label the collection of saved content however they wish. This adds an element of permanence that affords users the ability to curate and present content that speaks to their personal identity outside of what they post to their feed.

For example, in Figure 3 there are five saved highlights on Tim’s profile. These highlights are labeled: “in my feels, friends, Redken, family, and PNW.” The “in my feels” highlight reel consists of saved selfies, most of which focus on outfit choices which communicates to other users Tim is into fashion. The “friends” and “family” highlight reels consist of photographs and videos of Tim with their friends and family. This highlight communicates with other users that family and friends are important to Tim. The “Redken” highlight reel consists of photographs and videos of Tim working on hair and attending training seminars. This highlight communicates with other users that Tim is a professional in the hair industry. All of these highlights communicate something about Tim’s personal identity to other users while simultaneously reinforcing Tim’s own perception of self.

Enacted Identity

The second frame of CTI is enacted identity, which is an individuals’ performed or expressed identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Essentially, enacted identity is the active voice of identity as it is acted out as social behavior through communication (Jung & Hecht, 2004). In order to enact one’s identity there must be communication. Communication is fundamentally a

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social act, which is why social identity is so closely connected to the concept of performing self. Goffman (1955) argues that the concept of self is a social process rather than a fixed component of an individual. He uses the concept of a theoretical stage and performers acting to explain his theories on presentation of self. He argues one man will play many parts throughout his life depending on different stages of life and who he interacts with. Goffman also argues there is no true self and that instead each “mask” an individual, or performer, wears in different social scenarios *is* one’s true self. Similarly, Jenkins (1996) argues that all components of human identity are more or less social. “Social identity is constructed from ones understanding of who they are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people’s understandings of themselves and of others” (Jenkins, 1996, p.5). He describes identity as a process of becoming rather than being, and that identity should be described plural as identities due to the fact that who we are is never a singular, final or settled matter (Jenkins, 1996). Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue that this multifaceted performance of selfhood is largely produced by linguistic interaction.

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue that identity does not emerge at a single analytical level but rather operates at multiple levels simultaneously. They argue it is through the interaction level that each level of identity gains meaning, which is how identity can be understood as a centrally linguistic phenomenon. Their analysis coincides with other research and theories, including CTI (Hecht, 1993), that view identity as something constructed and enacted socially through discourse rather than as a result of discourse. Platforms such as Instagram afford a theoretical stage for users to perform their various identities through its features and frameworks. One of Instagram’s features that affords users the ability to enact their identity is the caption feature on the photographs they choose to post and share. The caption feature affords a linguistic communication of a user’s identity for both other users to perceive and to reinforce their own

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perception of self. For example, in Figure 1 Tim has captioned their self-portrait with: “when you take ‘becoming one with nature’ a little too seriously lolz” and “Also, it’s #worldmentalhealthday so don’t forget to love yourself a little extra today.” The first comment about becoming one with nature enacts a humorous part of Tim’s identity. The second comment about World Mental Health day enacts a mental health awareness part of Tim’s identity. These captions were both optional, as well as personal, and afford Tim the ability to linguistically express, and therefor enact, their identity on Instagram in addition to the photograph they are posting. This expression can also be afforded by the story feature of Instagram.

The story feature of Instagram affords users the ability to enact their identity through the recording of live videos clips and sharing of photographs. This feature is often used for “vlogging” style content, which is when a user records themselves talking about a specific topic or captures themselves doing something in their day-to-day life. By sharing this type of content a user is communicating with their audience how they want to be perceived. For example, in Figure 3 Tim has a highlight on their profile of saved stories titled “Pacific Northwest.” Inside this highlight is a multitude of saved video clips and photographs of Tim exploring and taking pictures on the coast and in the forests. This feature allows Tim to communicate to others their love of nature and exploration that they otherwise associate in their posts through hashtags and photograph descriptions. By posting this type of content Tim is enacting a part of their identity through a shared behavior.

Relational Identity

The third frame of CTI, relational frame of identity, is how an individual develops and shares their identity partially by internalizing how others view them, evaluating their relationships with others, how they view themselves in relation to others, and a relationship itself

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(Jung & Hecht, 2004). Since people have multiple identities, those identities exist in relation to each other (Jung & Hecht, 2004) and within the contingent framework of interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Additionally, an individual's relationship with someone else can also serve as an identity in and of itself (Jung & Hecht, 2004). In essence, an individual will perceive their own identity in relation to other people and through their relationships with those people. This can be seen in the complex relationship between gender and sexual identity.

For example, Wyman's film *A Boy Named Sue* documents the transition of a transgender man named Theo. In this film Theo and his partner, Lisi, discuss the complexity of transitioning from self-identified lesbian partners to a heteronormative dynamic with Theo's transition from female to male. Lisi speaks about her personal struggle of feeling like she has to abandon her identity as a lesbian if she wishes to continue dating Theo who now identifies as a straight man. This example illustrates how much relational identity contributes to an individual's' perception of self and construction of identity. Social media applications like Instagram build their features and frameworks around the concept that people want to express and build their relational identity with others through interaction and association. This can be seen when users post images of and associate themselves with other people.

According to Davies (2007), images accrue meanings from their digital contexts and the original narrative that comes with that picture. This picture then evolves into that of a new-shared experience which develops meaning through the participation and collaboration social media applications afford. This change can affect people's perceptions of an experience (Davies, 2007). In other words, posting an image on Instagram can affect how an individual views that experience and themselves in relation to others. For example, let's say an individual were to attend an event that ended up not being that enjoyable, but they still posted a photo on Instagram

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of themselves and a friend appearing to have a good time. If other Instagram users commented about how much fun that event looks this could potentially alter that individual's perception of the event. This accrual of meaning can also be seen in the digital contexts of displayed social connections.

Papacharissi (2010) argues, the appeal of social media applications is that they provide a stage to publicly present one's self and one's social connections. "The self, in late modern societies, is expressed as fluid abstractions, reified through the individual's association with a reality that may be equally flexible" (Papacharissi, 2010, p.207). This concept points to the flexibility of an individual's identity and how it is reinforced through an equally flexible digital representation. Papacharissi also notes that identity can be seen as a social performance, especially on social media applications, that is reinforced and authenticated by the association of social circles. This association of social circles is afforded by several features and frameworks of Instagram.

On Instagram users can "follow" other accounts. To follow another account means you will see that user's content in a personalized feed of content from everyone you follow. A user can also see who others follow by clicking on "following" which will generate a list of other accounts that user is following, which is viewable by anyone. It's common for users to follow each other to show support, even if they don't know one another. This means they will both see the content each other posts to Instagram on their feeds. In contrast, it is common for celebrities to have millions of followers but only be following a small amount of people in return. This means many people will see the content the celebrity posts to Instagram, but the celebrity themselves will only see the content of the selected few accounts they follow. The display of which and how many accounts an individual follows next to how many accounts are following them

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affords the construction of relational identity by publicly presenting an association of social circles or other accounts a person wants to be associated with. This type of association can also be seen in the “tagging” feature on Instagram.

To “tag” another account on Instagram is done by using the at (@) symbol followed by the username of the account being tagged. This feature can be used for multiple reasons. When an account is tagged in a photograph or post that user is notified that they have been tagged by another user. This communicates that another user wishes to share, draw their attention to, or give them credit for a post. By publicly tagging another account a user is able to show they have some association or connection with that account, whether it be as a fan, supporter, friend, significant other, family member, etc. Users are given the option to remove their tag if they have been tagged in something they don’t wish to be associated with or identified in. This public display of social circles affords users the ability to construct their relational identity. This can also be applied to photographs that depict two people together.

When an individual posts a photograph of themselves with other people in it they are actively constructing their relational identity by visually communicating their relationship with that person on Instagram. For example, in Figure 3 Tim has a highlight of saved stories titled “friends.” Within this highlight are saved video clips and photographs of Tim with their friends, many of whom are tagged. This communicates to other Instagram users Tim’s relationship with those people who are tagged, which is publicly confirmed through the image itself and the allowed existence of the tag. Posting photos of themselves with other people affords Tim the ability to construct a relational identity. The affordance of relational identity construction can also be seen in the communal frame of identity as social connections become publicly displayed within digital communities.

Communal Identity

The fourth and final frame of CTI, communal frame of identity, is how a group of individuals define their identities (Jung & Hecht, 2004). This can be seen in expressions of cultural identity that are shared through posts about food, style of dress, attending cultural events, or participating in cultural holidays that a user perceives as demonstrative of their cultural identity. Holland (2001) explores identity as a result of culture: “Identity is a concept that figuratively combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations” (p.5). Holland argues that identity is a social product and serves as an important basis from which people create new activities, worlds and ways of being. “Identities are our way of figuring the interfaces among these dimensions of collective life; our way of naming the places where society organizes persons and persons in turn reorganize, albeit in modest steps, societies; the pivots of our lived worlds” (Holland, 2001, p.287). With this understanding our identity shapes the way we view ourselves and the role we assume in the world we live in. One major feature of Instagram that relates to the communal frame of identity is the ability to interact with other users within a shared community and/or culture through the act of liking, tagging and sharing.

Paralinguistic digital affordances refer to the lightweight acts of communication such as liking, tagging, and sharing (Hayes & Wohn, 2016). These acts can be considered phatic in nature, which affords communication and interaction without a specific language or message associated (Hayes & Wohn, 2016). There are three main gratifications of receiving paralinguistic digital affordances: emotional, status, and social gratifications (Hayes & Wohn, 2016). On Instagram a user can like, save, tag, or share a post, which can all be classified as lightweight acts of communication. Within a network of followers, users can see what each other like and

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share. This type of surveillance affords an individual the ability to show their support/liking of other user's content, which in turn builds upon their own presentation of self by building and supporting a community of people with shared interests and/or cultural identities. For example, if an individual who self-identifies as queer likes and/or shares the content of other queer people on Instagram they are actively constructing their cultural identity as a queer person by showing their involvement and/or support of other people in the queer community. In contrast to paralinguistic digital affordances there are also linguistic forms of communication that, when used on Instagram, can afford the construction communal identity.

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argue shared social identity can be expressed through the use of "innovative quotative markers" (p.593). These quotative markers can include the use of slang or other languages. This concept can be applied to the language an individual uses when communicating on social media platforms such as Instagram and how it affords that user the construction of their cultural and/or communal identity. For example, in Figure 2 the caption Tim chose to use for the photograph is "her name is trixx." This caption communications with other users not only that trixx is one of Tim's performed identities but also serves as a linguistic marker for Tim's involvement in the queer community. "Her name is..." is an expression often used among people in the queer community to introduce themselves, a persona, or a stage name. This type of marker has the potential to be recognized by other people in the queer community which can contribute to an individual's construction of communal identity (Anspach, 2018). The construction of communal identity is also afforded by the hashtag feature of Instagram.

The use of hashtags are an important feature and framework of Instagram. Hashtags are a word or phrase that proceed a hash sign (#) and are used on social media to categorize and identify content on a specific topic. Instagram users can search key words within the framework

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of Instagram to explore and discover other users' content that has been tagged as relating to their search. The hashtag feature of Instagram affords users the ability to share their content with individuals who are interested in similar content. It also affords users the ability to categorize and identify themselves in their photographs. Both of these affordances contribute to an individual's construction of communal identity.

For example, in Figure 1 Tim used the following hashtags: #post #instadaily #instagood #instagay #gay #potd #ootd #lookoftheday #portland #oregon #oregonexplored #pnw #pnwonderland #nature #naturelover #guyswithstyle #guyswithtattoos #mensfashionpost #instastyle #stylegram#aesthetic #liveauthentic #justgoshoot #explore #summerhaze. These hashtags were all selected by Tim and used on a photograph of himself. Hashtags like #gay, #naturelover, and #guyswithstyle all speak to how Tim wishes to present himself to others and how they want to be perceived. These hashtags communicate with other users, and reinforce Tim's own self-perception, that Tim identifies as gay and loves both fashion and nature. The ability to communicate these aspects of Tim's identity afford them the ability to connect with other people who also identify or participate in the queer, fashion, or nature-loving communities. These connections actively aid in the construction of communal identity.

On the surface level, hashtags are a way to identify and categorize content, but they can also serve as a way to categorize and curate the identity of people. By following #gay Tim can discover other people within the gay community and reinforce their own cultural identity by liking and sharing other queer folk's content and therefore reinforce their self-perception as a member of the queer community. This constructed presentation of, and participation in, communal identity has the potential to be quite powerful for diverse and marginalized identities that may not find representation within their own lived communities.

Conclusion

This literature review aimed to gain a better understanding of the role Instagram has in the construction of identity by analyzing the communication theory of identity (Hech, 1993) and by reviewing existing literature on identity, as well as the methodologies behind representing selfhood, to see how they apply to the features and frameworks of Instagram. The features and frameworks of Instagram that were addressed in this paper include: posts, user profiles, feeds, stories, highlights, hashtags, location services, and paralinguistic digital affordances such as liking, sharing, and tagging. It's important to look at the relationship between social media usage and the construction of identity because anyone who uses social media is actively or passively constructing an identity that ultimately influences how they perceive themselves, others, and the world around them.

Existing research in communication studies and identity is highly segregated. Often, analysis of identity construction and the socio-cultural influences of social media applications are done independent of each other. There remains a lacking presence of research that bridges these concepts while analyzing a specific social media application. It is my hope that studies like this one will bring social media applications like Instagram to the forefront of current and future discussions of modern-day identity construction and performance. The study of identity dates back long before digital media ever existed, and as we continue to launch forward into a digitized world it becomes increasingly important that we expand socio-cultural perspectives of identity to include the theoretical digitized stages on which we now perform.

Based on this research, I argue that Instagram has the potential to play a large role in a user's construction and presentation of identity. An argument was made for some of the features of Instagram and how they contribute to one or more of the four frames of identity within the

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communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993). By viewing social media applications such as Instagram as active facilitators in the construction of identity, we can begin to understand how social media applications like Instagram afford much more than networking, news, and entertainment. Instagram affords the construction and curation of personal, enacted, relational, and cultural identity(s) through its features and frameworks. This affordance adds another layer to the complexity of identity construction and contributes to an individual's communicated identity and holistic perception of self.

There were a couple limitations to this literature review. First, analyzing the four frames of communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993) separately proved to be less comprehensive at times since all four frames function cohesively to construct an individual's identity. This limitation is addressed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) when they note, from an analyst perspective, that "it is not a matter of choosing one dimension of identity over others, but of considering multiple facets in order to achieve a more complete understanding of how identity works" (p.593). Future research could look at the features and frameworks of a social media application independently and apply which ever frame of identity is applicable to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the four frames function together. Second, social media applications are continuously updating and evolving, so the ability to provide research that will remain applicable to future applications can prove challenging. Future research could apply the communication theory of identity to the features and frameworks of other social media applications such as dating or networking apps.

The recognition of Instagram's role in the construction of identity has the potential to be quite powerful for diverse and marginalized identities. This research could lead to further discussion and studies on how minority groups, such as the queer community, use the

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affordances of social media applications to construct an identity and concept of selfhood outside of their non-computer-mediated experiences. Furthermore, I hope studies like this one will prompt further research and discourse on the importance of digitized platforms for individuals who otherwise don't have the safety or community to understand, explore, discover, and/or celebrate their identity. Identity construction is inevitable whereas identity exploration is a privilege, a privilege everyone should have access to. In a world becoming increasingly connected we must do what we can to make sure all identities and voices are recognized, represented and heard.

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