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Self-Perception and Self-Representation in Twitter Biographies

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B.A. in Applied Languages



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Abstract

Social media have evolved dramatically in recent years, becoming central in contemporary culture, and, likewise, Twitter has grown to play a huge part in the lives of many; in particular, young people. With emerging tendencies among this group to present themselves through online personas, often different from their ‘real life’ or offline selves, it is important to study how young people portray themselves online; this study uses 160-character Twitter biographies as an example. The aim was therefore to investigate 18-25-year-old students’ Twitter biographies, using discourse analysis, and comparing these with the students’ own self-perceptions. Qualitative data were collected, from 26 participants, who completed an online survey, giving 25-words-or-less descriptions of themselves, their Twitter biographies, and finally, their thoughts on self-perception, and self-representation in Twitter biographies. The descriptions and biographies were analysed and compared, using discourse analysis. Findings show varying styles of biography (professional, humorous, mysterious, descriptive), which include a total of 5 languages, and identity-based content which tends to include professions, interests, humour, areas of study, but also references to relationships and sexuality. The descriptions are generally more serious, with more negative traits, and are often more honest, although some biographies showed users were actually more honest and upfront online than in reality. All of this suggests that there are indeed differences in self-perception, and self-representation in Twitter biographies. The results show how young people often behave differently online, putting forward a more positive, entertaining, or likeable version of themselves, and holding back other details, while others see social media as an opportunity to be more open, and express themselves more freely than they might dare to offline. It is important to be aware of these differences in online and offline representations of the self, but also the differing attitudes towards online self-representation, as users can create exaggerated or more flattering personas, when given a 160-character online space, publicly available to potentially anyone, on a website on which having ‘followers’ plays a huge role.

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that this project is entirely my own work, in my own words, and that all sources used in researching it are fully acknowledged and all quotations properly identified. It has not been submitted, in whole or in part, by me or another person, for the purpose of obtaining any other credit / grade. I understand the ethical implications of my research, and this work meets the requirements of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (reference: 2015-12-30-AHSS).

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Aims

Social media have become hugely popular in recent times, for adults and youth alike (Boyd 2011). This study takes one social media site – Twitter – and analyses firstly, how its users perceive themselves, and secondly, how they represent themselves in their biographies on the site. It also aims to discover whether students who use Twitter have different self-perceptions from their self-representations online. It analyses the language students use to describe themselves, the identities they portray, and how they project them. It also examines the language of their Twitter biographies, what techniques they use to represent their selves, and what identities they project. It compares the sets of data from their self-descriptions and Twitter biographies, in order to discover if there are any differences, or trends. It investigates why they present themselves in these ways both online and offline, and why they think there are differences or similarities in their online and offline identities, who they believe to be their audience on Twitter, and what they feel is the purpose of their Twitter biographies.

1.2 Rationale and Importance of the Study

As a relatively new medium of computer-mediated communication, Twitter provides an insight into how people use new forms of technology to communicate. It sheds light on how individuals communicate and represent themselves online, in public. Analysing Twitter biographies allows for exploration into how Twitter users use language, in a very limited space, to express and even market themselves to potentially global audiences. Examining these ways of representing the self can offer a deeper understanding of how the human mind works, what motivates individuals to project particular identities online, and even what they wish to achieve in portraying themselves in certain ways. It can also explain why people use social media sites such as Twitter in the first place. Do they wish to communicate solely with friends, family, and people they already know, from their offline interactions? Or do they want to reach a wider, and potentially worldwide audience? If it is the latter, then what are their reasons for wanting to connect with people they do not ‘know’ outside of the world of social media? This research paper investigates the reasons and ways students represent themselves in their Twitter biographies, and compares it with how they actually perceive themselves, to give an understanding of whether people behave differently offline, and on social media sites, such as Twitter.

1.3 Outline of the Chapters

The following chapter gives an insight into the background research considered relevant to this research project. It focusses in particular, on three main areas: new media and Twitter, self-perception and self-representation, and finally, language. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the study, providing a description of the study, as well as a description of both the survey and the questions used. It also outlines the research methods used, the ethical considerations and the collection of all of the data used in the research, detailing relevant background information about the participants in general. Chapter 4 explores and analyses the findings, firstly explaining slight edits made to the data, where necessary, in order to maintain anonymity, focussing on the participants' self-perceptions, and lastly, on their Twitter biographies. Chapter 5 discusses common themes and tendencies in the data, and examines the reasons for these. Finally, Chapter 6 summarises the findings of the study, draws conclusions from the research, discusses the limitations of the study, and makes suggestions for further research in this area.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an insight into the previous studies and research related to this research project. The literature review identifies and discusses the main research areas which have examined self-representation, in particular in online contexts. It draws upon research into three main areas – those of new media and Twitter, self-representation, and language. Within these, key theories are evaluated, to better understand the findings of this research paper.

2.2 New Media and Twitter

Bolter and Grusin (1999) coined the term “remediation” to refer to the process of refashioning previous forms of media. Essentially, this remediating involves reinventing and developing upon past and present forms of media (as opposed to creating entirely new and different forms of media from scratch). A contemporary example would be music-streaming mobile phone applications such as Spotify, which allow individuals to listen to music – as radio, and record, CD, and MP3 players and the like have done – but develop upon this by making more music more easily accessible, and including various functions, such as the ability to ‘follow’ artists, and create playlists. Clearly, then, despite being written almost two decades ago, the theory in this book continues to be essential to new media studies, as they refer to this infinite evolution of media. It could also be said, that Twitter remediated text messaging, news reporting, journalism, blogging and social media. Murthy (2013) reinforces this idea of Twitter redefining existing media, explaining that it has changed cultural practices in several areas, from writing diaries to looking for jobs. It has even changed how businesses work, with companies using Twitter for direct, public contact with unhappy customers (Murthy 2013; Díaz-Ortiz 2011). Twitter allows for interaction with customers, and indeed any user, regardless of location (Murthy 2013; Díaz-Ortiz 2011). The global nature of this social media platform then arguably influences how Twitter users project their identities; as noted by Goffman (1963), individuals modify their behaviour in public based on the social situation they find themselves in. In the case of Twitter, this relates to the audience, or at least, the imagined or target audience.

Boyd has done extensive research on social network sites, with a primary focus on ethnography, examining individuals’ social practices and interactions (Boyd 2014, 2011,

2008, 2006). She refers to publics which are remediated or altered through social media as “networked publics” (Boyd 2014, 2011, 2008), and explains that they facilitate social gathering, and interactions with a wider audience than just people they know (Boyd 2011). Lange (2008) conducted a study on YouTube-based identity projection, looking at users’ quantities and methods of sharing. Similarly, Georgakopoulou (1997) analysed a computer-mediated form of communication – email – while her ‘Small stories’ research (Georgakopoulou 2013) focussed on an analysis of responses, in YouTube comments, to a video-centred news story. All three studies observed the various capabilities of these new media in facilitating identity construction, affiliation, intertextuality and linguistic choice.

Before conducting any research into behaviour on Twitter, it is essential to understand it. Books written by Murthy (2013) and O’Reilly and Milstein (2009) provide answers to the fundamental, initial question: What is Twitter? O’Reilly and Milstein (2009) provide a concise summary of the features and capabilities of this communication tool, outlining its similarities with other computer-mediated communication tools. Murthy (2013) explains and contextualises Twitter, discusses its nature, compares it to Facebook, outlines some of its various functions as a social media platform, and looks at how social communication has developed up until now. Previous research explores how Twitter’s various functions, such as its communicative, emergency support, equalising, endangering, misinformation and critical functions, come into play in a global commentary during a crisis (Caulfield 2015). Twitter allows its users to publish Facebook-style status updates (tweets), limited to 140 characters (Murthy 2013), and this restriction allows for frequent, almost endless publications (Zappavigna 2012). Following any particular user is optional, and can be revoked, so there is an emphasis on being interesting, informative or entertaining on Twitter (O’Reilly and Milstein 2009). This, like the concise nature of Twitter publications, is in keeping, in part, with Grice’s maxims of conversation – which are briefly explained by Yule (2010) – in particular the quantity maxim, which suggests being no more or less informative than necessary. However, Twitter is a “context-less world” (O’Reilly and Milstein 2009, p.155), which may explain any disregard for Grice’s other maxims, one of which dictates that contributions should be clear and relevant (Yule 2010). As technology makes replicating and modifying content extremely easy (Boyd 2011), it facilitates neglect of the quality maxim, which says to exclude anything the speaker thinks is false or lacking in sufficient proof (Yule 2010).

This research area is essential in order to be able to understand Twitter and begin a study of identity portrayal in Twitter biographies. Twitter does not make users fill in their biographies when signing up, simply asking them to add a name and username. As a result, users can exclude a biography; others, however, like to include them. Adding more information to a profile makes accounts seem more ‘real’, and less like spam accounts (O’Reilly and Milstein 2009). As it takes very little time to add a biography on Twitter, there is, arguably, potential for great variation in how much thought users put into them. However, this 160-character section provides the opportunity “to tell your life story” (O’Reilly and Milstein 2009, p.23).

2.3 Self-perception and Self-Representation

Identity is a complex term, both referring to what differentiates us from, and connects us with, other people (Buckingham 2008), and it is a fundamental part of self-perception and self-representation. Identities both vary within people, and within the contexts they find themselves in (Buckingham 2008). Goffman (1959) provides a thorough examination of self-presentation, taking a dramaturgic approach to his study, analysing human interactions in terms of acting, and looking at why individuals push certain aspects of what they perceive about themselves. This is essential in research into self-perception in Twitter biographies, as users craft online versions of themselves and present them to a public audience. Anyone can view a public Twitter profile, without the user knowing of their observance, encouraging this “theatrical aspect of profiles”. In interaction, users are often “putting on a show for others to see” (Murthy 2013, p.4). Individuals present versions of themselves based on their expected audiences (Goffman 1959).

Goffman’s later study (Goffman 1963) differed in that it specifically focused on human conduct in public, especially how individuals modify their behaviour in social situations, the expectations and rules involved in these, and the consequences of not adhering to these guidelines. Due to the year in which this research was conducted, it was unable to provide an insight into human behaviour on social media, however the theories outlined can offer greater understanding of the reasoning behind certain identity-projection when applied to self-representation in online social situations. Disobeying rules in a digital context, for example on Twitter, can lead to users being unfollowed, blocked, reported for spam or abuse, or even banned from Twitter (O’Reilly and Milstein 2009). Users can get a sense of these

expectations – namely, how they should present themselves – by looking at other profiles (Boyd 2008), just as they get these cues from other people in real life (Goffman 1959, 1963).

Alternatively, Roche (2014) qualitatively applies Goffman's theory (Goffman 1959) to a social media context – Facebook. He investigates what information and kinds of photographs participants were willing to share on Facebook, as well as gathering data on what they think about their interactions on the site. He discovers that in their online self-representations, his participants – graduate students – consider that their audience can range from employers to peers. Their desires, then, include showing that they are fun, social people (to seek approval, and sometimes to incite jealousy), as well constructing professional, employable versions of their selves. Therefore, they are careful to express themselves as well as they can. Conversely, younger internet users, such as teens, have a tendency to almost treat certain websites as personal diaries, and a means of sharing any information they like (Stern 2008). In comparison to older users, this kind of sharing could be seen as over-dramatic, insignificant, or in some ways, an overrepresentation of the self. Social media profiles, to a certain extent, give users control in what they share about themselves, however there is much room for misinterpretation of text in digital environments (Boyd 2008).

The “networked self”, which encompasses “both that self that is doing the networking and the various selves that are presented”, can lead different lives online and offline (Bolter and Grusin 1999, p.232-233). Similarly, the “hypermediated self” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, p.232) is a constantly-changing network of connections. Other studies of online self-representation show how individuals use new media to construct their networked and hypermediated selves as they project identity, affiliation, and self-expression (Boyd 2014; Lange 2008; Georgakopoulou 2013, 1997). Information-sharing on Twitter is often influenced by what the sharer believes they will gain from sharing certain information (Gilpin 2011). Significantly, while the user usually wants to profit in terms of reputation or wealth, they wish to do so at the lowest possible cost to themselves (Gilpin 2011). Whenever social judgement of individuals is based on their affiliation with others, connections between people thus portray the identities of those they associate with (Goffman 1963). Finding individuals with similar interests and ideas in online, text-based environments is quick and easy, thanks to the existence of search tools (Boyd 2008). All of this identity and alliance construction constantly and simultaneously occurs in text, and analysing it is important in comprehending the projection of cultural values and power relations, as well as how individuals relate to their audience (Fairclough 1995b). Although Fairclough (1995b) analyses self-representation in

media texts, these involve key features of social media texts, such as audience, identity and alliance construction, linguistic choice, and content diversity and variability.

Twitter's public nature, and the freedom it gives its users to interact with any other user, without having to first get permission, influences user behaviour (Murthy 2013). In social networking sites, 'public', as an adjective, describes that which can potentially be accessed by anyone with internet access, including individuals unknown to the user (Boyd 2008). On Twitter, this public nature can result in the creating and strengthening of alliances (Murthy 2013), which is a key part of identity projection in the aforementioned studies (Boyd 2014; Lange 2008; Georgakopoulou 2013, 1997). However, these studies do not acknowledge the role of self-perception or language choice in Twitter-based self-representation. Becoming a 'follower' of a user's tweets does not result in any expected reciprocation; unlike Facebook, subscribing to other users' profiles does not necessarily mean there is any social connection (Zappavigna 2012). Twitter users, then, may need to find other ways to project social affiliation.

Highlighting the role of media in self-perception and self-representation, Bolter and Grusin (1999) examine how individuals use various media to define and express their identities. They point out that this is a continuous phenomenon – thus relevant to contemporary studies of media-based identity projection – because of the interconnectedness of current and previous media in people's understanding of any new media encountered. However, as media have changed dramatically and will only continue to develop, their theories need to be applied to social media in 2016, to document transformations in media use.

Communication on social media is often not serious, but rather, fun, or even carnivalesque (Deumert 2014). Portraying oneself as carnivalesque can actually unite and include people (Bakhtin 1965). In fact:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.

(Bakhtin 1965, p.7)

Thus, acting in a carnivalesque manner on Twitter can help to invite other users into an individual's group or circle of online friends and acquaintances. It projects a fun identity, but also suggests an open-minded and welcoming nature. The experimental nature of social media sites allows users to construct and play with new worlds and identities (Deumert 2014).

The very ways in which individuals express themselves online, and the language they use, conveys a certain type of persona (Deumert 2014). Therefore, language is a key tool in self-representation.

2.4 Language

Studies show that discourse strategies, such as narrative stancetaking, code-switching, code-shifting, and the use of language play and intertextuality (for an explanation of intertextuality, see Fairclough (1995b)), play a fundamental role in written forms of online identity projection (Georgakopoulou 2013, 1997). Linguistic strategies are also essential in constructing alliances in new media environments (Georgakopoulou 2013, 1997). Georgakopoulou also analysed private email messages in order to investigate what is shareable and what is not shareable in computer-mediated communication (Georgakopoulou 2004), however individuals' perceptions of how 'shareable' certain information is could differ hugely between the private context of email discourse and the entirely public context of Twitter biographies. The choice of certain search words in tagging on social media can facilitate or hinder access to profiles and content (Lange 2008; Zappavigna 2012). This in turn affects communication, as easily accessible content results in messages being received, and a wider audience means more chance of response. Creating and using codes (such as acronyms and in-jokes) in these social media tags also allows for the creation of social groups and alliances, and, on YouTube, allows for access to public videos to be greatly limited, or, if desired, shared with larger audiences with shared interests. Lange (2008), however, does not acknowledge the importance of users' written biographies – which on YouTube are found in the 'About' page of profiles – in the construction of their online identities.

Discourse is social and dialogic by nature, and can be polyphonic, i.e. representing multiple voices, or heteroglossic, representing different voices. Language itself is, and always has been "heteroglot" – connecting, referencing, overlapping and indeed contradicting itself (Bakhtin 1981, p.291). Although these theories are thirty-five years old, they can be applied to social media discourse analysis in order to understand linguistic choice in written projections of identity. Rather than being particularly structured, like traditional forms of communication, Twitter discourse encompasses polyphony (many voices), because any user can join in at any time (Murthy 2013). Both this, and especially, the hashtagging feature of Twitter, often result in interaction being triggered easily, even between strangers (Murthy

2013). Computer-mediated discourse is concerned with language use in communication produced by people using networked computers to send messages to others (Herring 2001). As Yule (2010, p.142) argues, it is essential to understand the “language beyond the sentence”, in order to make sense of and draw meaning from “messages” we encounter. Similarly, Fairclough (1995b) insists that the wider context of communicative events should be considered in any discourse analysis. In interpreting meaning, it is people (social media audiences, for example) who have to refer to their own knowledge and experience in order to make coherent connections (Yule 2010). This is evident in the use of humour and intertextuality, and the creating of alliances, affiliations and solidarity found in analyses of self-representation online (Georgakopoulou 2013, 1997; Lange 2008).

Significantly, on Twitter, “all discourse is public” (Murthy 2013, p.4). This gives users a platform; it gives them power (Díaz-Ortiz 2011; Murthy 2013). Every user has a voice, which is powerful both as individuals, and when united (Díaz-Ortiz 2011). Twitter’s character limit makes it a form of microblogging, and Zappavigna (2012) contends that these kinds of character limits make microblogging worthy of study from pragmatic and semantic perspectives.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided background research from areas relevant to the study. It has explored concepts relating to new media and Twitter, self-perception and self-representation, and language, thus preparing for subsequent research to be carried out on self-perception and self-representation in Twitter biographies. The next chapter will discuss the methods undertaken in order to carry out this research project.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the methodology of the study, providing both a description of the study, and a description of the survey and of the questions used. It also outlines the techniques used during the research, the ethical considerations, and how all of the data used in the research was gathered, while also detailing appropriate background information about the participants as a group.

3.2 Description of Study

The aim of the research is to investigate young people's self-perceptions, and their self-representations in their Twitter biographies, using discourse analysis. Qualitative data were collected, from 26 participants (11 males, and 15 females), who completed an online questionnaire (see Appendix A), giving 25-words-or-less descriptions of themselves, access to their Twitter biographies, and finally their thoughts on self-perception and self-representation in Twitter biographies (all of which can be found in Appendix C). Discourse analysis is used to analyse and compare the descriptions and biographies, examining various discourse strategies. The questionnaire was designed to allow the authors of these texts to reflect on and explain their discourse strategies. At the time of data collection, participants were all 18-25-year-old students at Irish universities. In keeping with the study's focus, most were undergraduates (the majority in their fourth year of university), however two participants were in their first year of postgraduate study. Most were in their early twenties. The majority were from the discipline of arts, humanities and social sciences, perhaps due to an increased interest in social media and microblogging among those in degree programs relating to areas such as English, media, journalism, languages and politics. However participation was offered to students from all disciplines; three were from business and three were from science. Participants had been using Twitter from as little as less than a year up to eight years, but the majority fell into the range of 4 to 7 years. Almost half of the participants said they engaged with the Twitter service several times a day.

Participants were recruited in various ways. The researcher's classmates and fellow University of Limerick students were invited to take part in a survey, provided they were Twitter users. Other students then took part, after being told about the survey by this original

group. In order to include participants from other Irish universities, the researcher's personal network of Twitter-using students was contacted to request participation. Inviting all of these users to participate was beneficial as some were not avid Twitter users, and many did not widely promote their Twitter accounts. This strategy was helpful in allowing a broader participation base than only examining young people who were particularly popular or prominent on Twitter. Participation requests were carried out both in person, and, in the case of location constraints, using computer-mediated communication, such as messaging services. As it was an online survey, it was possible to share the URL using the latter. Ethics approval was applied for, and has been approved by the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Limerick.

3.3 Description of Survey and Questions Used

The survey itself began by giving an information letter, which included the research intent, risks, and confidentiality, and then inviting participants to provide their Twitter usernames, if they both consented to give access to their Twitter biographies, and to take part in the survey. Following this, background information was collected, on the year and discipline of each student. The next section gathered data for the self-perception part of the analysis, requesting the following:

Describe yourself in approximately 25 words or less. (You may use structured sentences, phrases or words, or a combination of these.)

This description was asked for before information and opinions on Twitter use, in order to avoid any association between the description and Twitter biographies. A 160-character (25-word) limit was imposed here, within the technical specifications of the survey question, so that students could not go over this amount. This was done so that length restrictions would be consistent in the self-descriptions and the Twitter biographies, thus allowing for direct comparison of both sets of data. Students were given the opportunity to be as creative as they wished, with little restriction on how they formatted their description, other than length. The all-encompassing request to "describe yourself" also gave total freedom to include any information interpreted by the participant as relevant and important in their own self-perception. Students could therefore choose to include or focus on any part of their identity, such as their personality, occupation(s), values, background, or future hopes. This allowed

for investigation into whether the students pushed certain aspects of their perceived identities, like individuals in research by Goffman (1959) and Roche (2014).

Information was then collected on how long participants had been using Twitter, and how often they used it, before the following questions were asked in order to investigate why students pushed or concealed certain aspects of their selves:

- Who do you think your Twitter biography is written for and what is its purpose?
- Do you think there are differences between how people see themselves and portray themselves to others offline, and how they portray themselves in their Twitter biographies? Please explain.
- Are there any differences between your 25-word description of yourself in Section 2 and your Twitter biography? If you answer yes, why do you think there are differences?

The first of these three questions was designed to discover who participants' imagined audiences were, in order to better understand the reasoning behind the content of their biographies, and indeed to potentially reveal whether they used Twitter to connect mostly with people in their offline social networks, or with a wider, more global network of people they may not necessarily know outside of social media. The second question invited participants' general opinions and reflections on the notions of self-perception and self-representation in Twitter biographies. The final question aimed to determine if each individual participant portrayed themselves differently in their descriptions and biographies, and if so, sought their own explanation of this. This was in keeping with previous research on online and offline identity construction (Boyd 2014; Roche 2014; Lange 2008; Georgakopoulou 2013, 1997; Bolter and Grusin 1999).

There were no limits on answer length for the final three questions, to allow for as much elaboration and room for reflection as each participant desired. The main limitation of this, was that in a minority of cases, respondents elaborated very little. Where necessary, biography content was translated into English, either by the researcher, the biography creator, or, in the one entirely German biography, translated by final year University of Limerick students of German, at the request of the researcher. Finally, to maintain anonymity, participants' actual usernames, username links to other Twitter and social media accounts, and links to websites, have been replaced by pseudonyms (see Appendix B), and personal information is not used in the study.

Chapter 4 – Results

4.1 Introduction

All data used was submitted in plain formatting. Any underlining has been added by the researcher to highlight parts for analysis. Participants have also been given pseudonyms (for a full list of these, see Appendix B). To further preserve anonymity, for the student who included her Snapchat name, it was changed to “@SnapchatUserame”, and “@TwitterUser” was used to replace a link to a personal account in another participant’s biography. Square brackets are used in the descriptions and biographies to indicate that data has been edited for anonymity purposes.

4.2 Self-perception

As discussed by Buckingham (2008), individuals’ identities differ both within each person and within each situation they find themselves in. This is evident, firstly, in the contrasting self-perceptions found in the data collected, and secondly, in the differences between these self-perceptions, and the self-representations put forward publicly in participants’ Twitter biographies. The latter is explained later; to give context, and to allow for comparison, self-perception is analysed first.

Participants portrayed many positive elements of their identities in their self-descriptions (see Appendix C for a full list of the descriptions, and answers to all of the questions used in the survey). Conversely, many included fairly negative aspects, such as “weird”, “quiet” and “serious”. These honest self-evaluations were perhaps due to many participants not personally knowing the researcher, thus giving a sense of anonymity. As found in Lange’s (2008) study, anonymity plays an important role, and people feel more freedom to say whatever they like under the cover of anonymity. However, participants who may have felt less anonymous still included negative elements, so knowing the researcher may not necessarily have led them to exclude information. Common positive adjectives in the descriptions include “friendly”, “outgoing”, “funny”, “kind”, “enthusiastic”, and “intelligent” or “clever”.

Positive self-perception was portrayed not only in the use of positive adjectives, but also in the syntax and semantics of the descriptions. Syntactically, participants described

themselves in the first or the third person, or, in some cases, with an absence of subject. Six participants used the verb “to love”, yet it conveyed very different ideas:

Kate

Opinionated. Lazy, but in a good way. An idealist, looking to change the world through politics. Considerable amount of wit. Love music.

Jack

Tall, friendly, big into sport , outgoing, love going out, have ambition to have a good job and someday settle down

Kate and Jack use “love” to express their interests; Kate is passionate about music, while Jack confirms his “outgoing” nature by saying just how much he enjoys socialising.

Jennifer

love meeting people but have a desire to be liked that can lead to shyness. Easily stressed but getting better at coping

Despite her tendency to be shy, Jennifer really enjoys getting to know new people, but it appears that she may wish her timidity didn’t hold her back from being more outgoing. It is interesting that in her self-description, she is open about how stressed she often is, however she does not share this information online, in her Twitter biography.

Stephen

A 21 year old Irish student who loves travelling and a good time.

Kevin

I am a gas person who loves what they do

Stephen and Kevin both come across as being very enthusiastic and positive in their outlooks, mainly through their verb choice. Stephen mentions his huge interest in travel, but also, like Kevin, he expresses what may be a more general love for simply enjoying life.

Ciara

I'm hardworking, friendly and caring. I love spending time with my family and close friends. I've got the travel bug!

Ciara indicates that it is her friends and family that are important to her, more so than her hobbies or traits. Essentially, in each of these examples, “love” is used to highlight an extremely important part of the participants’ identities. This is in contrast with Emma’s declaration of her interests:

Emma

I'm a 21 year old Irish student of languages. I enjoy consuming things: news, literature, chocolate, and almost any content on the internet.

She merely shows an appreciation, rather than suggesting that any one of her interests is the most important thing in her life. This supports her identification with a broader range of interests than the other students, which she emphasises with the phrase “almost any content”.

Only two students mention that they are Irish, while one identifies as Irish by stating that Cork is her home county. Conversely, Kevin and Brian project Irish identities through discourse choice; they use Irish English vocabulary, namely “gas” (funny), and “sound” (nice).

It is noteworthy that five participants choose to use the noun “student” in the descriptions and in the biographies, while, despite most indicating exactly what they study, none use its verb form, explicitly saying that they “study”, e.g. languages. They therefore may see it mostly as their occupation, rather than identifying as people who actively research or learn specific subjects. This could be construed as showing a lack of engagement or regard, yet it may well indicate that for them, being a student is serious, and takes up most of their time, as would full-time employment. The latter is more likely considering that all five are final year students.

Interestingly, attributes of extroversion and introversion are prominent, with various adjectives used to hint at each. It is worth noting that indications of introversion in the descriptions are often hedged (*italics* are used below to highlight hedging, and to highlight other discourse strategies later on):

Sinéad

quiet *at first* becoming increasingly weirder as you get to know me

Ian

Outgoing, *a bit* quiet, hard working, friendly, intelligent

Here, both avoid saying that they are extremely quiet, or that it is a central to their personalities. Sinéad is only temporarily quiet, when around people she does not know well, and Ian is only somewhat quiet. This is in keeping with expressions of similar traits of introversion found in the study:

Jennifer

love meeting people but have a desire to be liked that *can lead to shyness*. Easily stressed but getting better at coping

Though not always shy, Jennifer can be, sometimes – she uses the modal verb ‘can’ to highlight this. While the participants appeared to think that these traits are not major factors in their personalities, it is significant that the traits are, seemingly, important enough to mention, even in the short space allowed.

Aoife

Ambitious, kind, generous, usually easy going, passionate, bubbly, enthusiastic, occasionally selfish, *reserved but outwardly friendly*, snobbish, confident.

Aoife is reserved, but tries not to let it show, and expresses this using “but” as a qualifier. “But” is actually used as a qualifier five times in the descriptions, but not once in the biographies. This suggests that participants are more reflective and realistic in their descriptions, projecting various aspects of their identities, even if this means including negative traits.

Siobhán

Serious, bookish, impulsive, secretive, loyal, trustworthy, sensitive, *introverted*, intuitive, pessimistic, self-doubting, perfectionist, idealist, impatient.

Unusually, in comparison with the other descriptions, Siobhán does not use hedges or qualifiers, and presents each of her traits in an upfront and equal manner.

Andrew

shy, awkward, weird

This is the shortest and most negative of the descriptions, showing characteristics more associated with introversion. Other excerpts (see above) include hedges and qualifiers, to avoid certain adjective use being entirely negative. Andrew, however, puts himself down in

two ways; he only uses adjectives generally seen as negative, and he uses just three words to describe himself, when he had the option of 25. This suggests perhaps that he doesn't see himself as important, or worth talking about.

Conversely, overwording is also evident in certain descriptions. According to Fairclough's (2001) research, this is when many words which have very similar meanings are used. In this data, overwording most commonly includes the word "outgoing"; in particular, it is used with "friendly", three times:

Laura

Outgoing, athletic, upbeat and friendly

Chloe

I would think of myself as outgoing, friendly and calm.

Ian

Outgoing, a bit quiet, hard working, friendly, intelligent

Both adjectives have exceptionally similar meanings, yet the participants chose to include them in their very short self-descriptions. As overwording indicates concern with some element of reality (Fairclough 2001), this may show that these students believe that they, or indeed, people in general, should be friendly. At the very least, it suggests that they place great importance on their own outgoing natures.

4.3 Self-Representation

Self-representation was analysed using data gathered from the Twitter biographies (see Appendix C). The biographies showed many instances of alliance construction, affiliation, networking, identity projection and remediation.

A striking contrast between the descriptions and the biographies is that the former do not include a single mention of the participants' actual universities, while "UL" appears five times in the biographies. Other universities are not mentioned, probably due to most students involved being from the University of Limerick. This tendency to mention one's university in online discourse allows for alliance construction and affiliation, and was also found to be an important feature in Lange's (2008) research. It makes it easier for individuals to find fellow

students, as well as immediately pointing out what users have in common with each other. The acronym “UL” is most likely used as it is much shorter than “University of Limerick” (two characters versus 20), so it fits, but it is also significant that “UL” is both commonly used by University of Limerick students, and does not make sense to Twitter users who are not familiar with this Irish university – namely, many people outside of Ireland. One of these examples actually linked to @UL, the University of Limerick institutional Twitter account (UL 2016). This was one of just two participants who linked to other Twitter accounts in their biographies:

Clodagh

4th Year Applied Languages @UL (French & German) / Cast Member @DisneylandParis / PRO @ULIntSociety / President @ULFrenchSoc. #Snapchat [@SnapchatUsername]

This tagging of various accounts strengthens Clodagh’s affiliation with these groups but also highlights her identity as a successful, outgoing person. It also projects importance; she mentions that she is the president and the PRO of two different societies in her university, and that she works for Disney, a huge, multinational corporation. She portrays a positive self-perception on Twitter by showing her involvement in numerous roles and identities (Myers-Scotton 1988). She uses language to market herself and make connections – to represent her self. None of these links are referred to in her self-description, so perhaps she does not believe she really is as successful as her biography portrays her. The use of new media in identity construction here is similar to findings by Georgakopoulou (1997, 2013), Lange (2008) and Sophocleous and Themistocleous (2014).

The only other example of tagging another account comes from the participant with the most negative self-description (“shy, awkward, weird”):

Andrew

Studying Computer Games Development in UL. [@TwitterUser] is amazing and smells like rainbows x

Here, he projects a completely different identity to the one he reveals in his description. His tagging of another user shows affiliation and alliance. Based on the discourse he includes surrounding @TwitterUser (i.e. “is amazing”, “smells like rainbows x”), she is most likely someone he knows, and, similarly, is likely to be a girlfriend or romantic interest, rather than a friend, family member, acquaintance, co-worker, or the like. If she is his girlfriend, this

contradicts somewhat Andrew's description of himself as someone who probably does not feel particularly comfortable in many social situations. Most notably, as seen previously, he is very negative about himself in his description, and he doesn't include anything obviously positive in his biography, other than @TwitterUser, who he praises, in quite a dramatic fashion.

Contrasting self-projections are evident in various discourse strategies. Kate uses quite similar styles in her self-description and her biography, as seen below:

Kate

Opinionated. Lazy, but in a good way. An idealist, looking to change the world through politics. Considerable amount of wit. Love music.

Always looking for people to make me tea 🍵 Thought doing a masters would be fun... it's not. Want time difference to stop being a hindrance!

It is curious that the participant uses "looking" in both sets of data. She uses the present continuous to refer to her ongoing efforts to achieve her remarkably different goals – changing the world, and finding people to make tea for her. Neither are complete, so she is also referring to the future here. This coincides with her perceived idea that she is "lazy". Qualifying it with "but", it appears she doesn't see this as a negative trait, as this "idealist" she seems to see herself as having great intentions. Pronouns are absent in both; this is common to many of the descriptions and biographies, perhaps because of the limited space. Here, both are mostly in the present tense, but references are made to the future (such as her goals), and her biography includes a verb in the past tense ("thought"), which shows reflection, but may be aimed more so at projecting self-deprecation (she feels she has made a poor life choice). It also allows her to incorporate the fact that she is a student, while projecting her views on whatever she is studying – namely, that she is apparently not enjoying it.

However, there are some clear differences; she uses a tea cup emoji in her biography. This adds a visual element to her mention of tea and is in keeping with the genre of social media, where emojis are commonly found. There is also a contrast in punctuation. It is absent between "tea" and the emoji, where a full stop would be expected. There is an ellipsis, showing both her reflection on her significant decision to pursue post-graduate education, and a contrast, in that she had idealised her masters (in keeping with her offline belief that she is

“an idealist”), but reality has shown her that it is not as good as she had expected. The exclamation mark at the end of the biography seems to convey emotion, and with the final sentence it suggests that someone (or something) she cares about is in a different time zone to her, and that this troubles her. Sharing emotion here is unusual when compared with most of the other Twitter biographies, which (aside from Andrew’s) do not do so this explicitly.

Jack demonstrated similar contrasting priorities to Kate in his data. He described his biography as “just a funny joke between me and a few friends”. It is unusual then, that he shared it publicly in his Twitter biography, as, though aiming for humour, it could cause potentially cause offense:

Jack

My dominant physique has ruined many a young lad on the hurling pitch and many young one in bed!!!!

Though he doesn’t specify the gender of “young one”, it is likely that it refers to women, as he specifically uses a term related to men (“young lad”) when referring to fellow hurlers. While other Twitter users in this study consider the broad, public audience when writing their biographies (Clodagh carefully markets her online persona, and Ciaran ensures he covers his academic, political and sporting interests). This biography was the only one found to include a derogatory sexual reference – though he says he is joking, he suggests that his sex life involves “ruining” women, “ruin” being a verb with quite negative connotations, indicating an extremely negative impact on the object involved. He appears to be objectifying women by comparing his treatment of them to his apparently similarly violent performances in hurling. This use of dramatic, potentially quite offensive language, however, is most likely an effort to reinforce his attempt at humour, and to portray himself as funny.

What is most interesting about Jack’s answers is the huge contrast between his biography, and his actual self-description, below:

Tall, friendly, big into sport , outgoing, love going out, have ambition to have a good job and someday settle down

They are consistent in portraying him as someone who seemingly is not at all shy, but, rather, very social and outgoing. Both also refer to his interest in sport, and contain information about his physical size – here he says he is “tall”; online he takes a more theatrical approach, acting as if he is so big or strong that it is potentially dangerous. This is in keeping with

Goffman's (1959) theory that humans 'perform' in order to project certain aspects of their identities. In Goffmanian terms, Twitter biographies would be the 'front stage' of this 'performance', as they are public, and put users on show to a potentially global audience. Yet, the most fascinating part of Jack's data is that he feels that two of his main priorities in life are to eventually get a "good job" and "settle down". His much more serious side only appears in his self-description, so perhaps it is not something he wishes to convey to others; he may prefer to be perceived, for example, as a strong, talented sportsman who is also skilled at attracting women. Roche (2014) notes that Facebook users tailor the information they present in order to impress certain audiences or comply with societal expectations. The difference in seriousness is not just evident in what Jack says, but in how he writes it. His description is fairly well-punctuated, in that his listing of his perceived ideas about himself includes commas, but the only punctuation in his biography is at the end, where he adds five exclamation marks. This helps to highlight that he is joking; for him Twitter biographies are "not [taken] seriously".

It is noteworthy that just two participants – both men – commented on their physique, and both did so publicly, in their biographies.

James

A linguist.Hopeless romantic.Dreamer. Big cock.

The first example (that of Jack) has been discussed above. James's is similar in that it is used to incorporate humour, and suggests certain sexual capability, but the humour here is mostly due to the huge difference in style. He appears quite serious when he calls himself a "linguist", then gets more pensive, and idealistic, with "Hopeless romantic" and "Dreamer", before suddenly switching to much more informal language, adding information about his penis size. Including detail of this manner in certain social media profiles may be caused by the tendency for social media to sometimes be used as dating sites (Boyd 2006); Twitter has even been refashioned into a dating tool by some (Murthy 2013). The contrast results in humour, but overall, James's biography seems heteroglossic, which is in keeping with the self-description he provides:

James

Confident,nice,hard working,can be funny at times,can be serious at times

There are multiple voices at play in his biography; he seems to have the serious and comedic sides he perceives he has in his self-description, yet aside from the suggestiveness and joking, he portrays himself as an academic, romantic, and idealist. This is intriguing because in his description he appears much more realistic, looking at various traits he believes he has, and presenting them in a direct, list format.

Women were not so open about anything directly connected to their sex lives, which suggests a lot about how women are viewed in Irish society. They may actually not feel that this is a subject they could mention so obviously in a public, online environment, because of how people might react, or how they may be perceived. It seems that this is not such an issue for men, based on this study. Nevertheless, one of the women who took the survey noted that although she is “not always as upfront about it in real life”, she declares her sexuality on her Twitter page:

Amy

21. Irish. Final year music student. // Gayer than expected. // three underscores. //

Based on her survey answers, this may be due to her belief that you can be more anonymous, and can even reinvent yourself in online environments. “Often, people feel a sense of security expressing their sexual identity online where anonymity and ambiguity are offered” Power (2009, p.143), and the nature of Twitter allows for certain anonymity, if desired. Or, perhaps Amy just wants her online audience to know more about her, because, for her, this is the function of Twitter biographies. She wishes to affiliate then, with similar people, so she includes what she sees as key aspects of her identity – her age, nationality, occupation, area of study and sexuality. Perhaps she is more open about her sexuality online because there is a larger potential audience of gay people there than in her offline networks, and therefore more people she shares this aspect of her identity with. In her self-description she says she is:

Enthusiastic, a little bit weird, a little bit lost.

This suggests that she sees herself as different (“weird”), and perhaps this then results in her feeling out of place (“lost”); maybe she is not sure where she belongs, but she searches for some form of belonging online, by projecting certain aspects of her self. It is interesting how she phrases her sexuality. Possibly unintentionally, by using a comparative adjective, she puts forward the idea that there are various levels of homosexuality, that it is not just a case of being gay or straight. She is not simply “gay”, but “gayer than expected”, as if it is unusual,

or perhaps a surprise to her, or to others. Either way, it does not seem to be something that was always known, so it may reflect that it is more common or ‘normal’ (expected) in society (in Ireland, or in a more general global context), to be heterosexual. This difference appears to be central to her identity, because she included her sexuality in her biography, despite that consequently making this quite personal information publicly available.

Though only two students described themselves as “opinionated”, this correlated with both demonstrating a significant interest in politics. Kate sees it as a tool to potentially change the world, while Ciaran publicly declares his membership of a political party – Fine Gael. Ciaran’s biography is almost entirely comprised of examples (underlined) of affiliation with specific communities:

Ciaran

22. Corkman. Student of Gaeilge, Français and Deutsch at UL. Gaeilgeoir. Member of Fine Gael. Politics. Cork City FC and Tottenham Hotspur. All views mine.

He connects with people of a similar demographic by sharing his age (“22”), gender, home county (“Corkman”), university (“UL”) and occupation (“Student”). He connects with fellow speakers of Irish, French, and German, by mentioning that he studies them, but also, strategically translating his mention of each into the relevant language, so that other speakers of these languages will understand, regardless of whether they speak any English. Irish is perhaps extra important to him, as he reiterates that he is an Irish speaker (“Gaeilgeoir”). It is significant that he uses this as well as mentioning that he studies “Gaeilge”; both are possibly key words used to project an Irish-speaking identity online, or to indicate that users’ tweets may be in Irish. “Member of Fine Gael” is included to tell people that he is part of this Irish political party, and “Politics” once again emphasises this interest of his. He also affiliates with fellow fans of the soccer teams Cork City and Tottenham Hotspur. In his responses to the opinion-based questions, he says he tweets about three main areas – soccer, politics, and what he studies (mainly languages) – and that he has “tailored” his biography so “people who have similar interests” might follow him.

Roche’s (2014) research involved graduates, some of whom were keen to present themselves on Facebook as employable. Conversely, this analysis of undergraduates’ Twitter biographies demonstrates generally much less concern with projecting an employer-friendly version of the self. It is interesting that this difference occurs between groups before and after university graduation, however, it is important to remember that Facebook and Twitter have

different purposes and audiences, and, most of all, that it is much easier for employers to find individuals on Facebook.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This research suggests that students represent their selves in many ways in their Twitter biographies, and though not always the case, it can be quite different to how they actually see themselves offline. This discussion explores the reasons for these differences, as well as examining common themes found in the data gathered from participants' self-descriptions, biographies, and overall reflections on the study.

5.2 Discussion

Certain participants suggested that they tailor their Twitter biographies based on what they tweet about, sharing their interests in order to potentially create affiliation with other users. This may explain why some self-descriptions differed from the biographies in that participants mentioned the importance they place on family; in the context of a Twitter biography, it may seem strange for a student to highlight this, especially when it is quite personal. It may also be an age factor, or caused by having a limited space to promote oneself. Several participants mentioned fun or humour being an element of their biography, while a similar number separately described themselves as funny or witty. Humour, then, is important here, and can help “establish familiar frames of reference”, while testing other users' cleverness, or seeking common ground (Georgakopoulou 1997, p. 157). In the Twitter biographies analysed, humour aims to reinforce friendships or create alliances, through quotes from popular culture (e.g. the film ‘Anchorman’) and in-jokes from specific communities (e.g. certain Tumblr users). This is consistent with findings by Lange (2008) and Georgakopoulou (1997). Users noted the importance of humour in their biographies, in helping them to connect with people they already knew offline, or indeed others who may wish to follow them.

It was found that for many participants, the content of their biographies was aimed at their friends; in fact some did not realise that even when their Twitter profiles are set to ‘private’, their biographies are still publicly visible. Likewise, research on YouTubers revealed that interviewees “did not express awareness about how their material could be accessed in ways outside their control” (Lange 2008, p.377). Others hoped to impress a wider audience of unknown users, who potentially shared interests with them. Intertextuality

(Georgakopoulou 2013, 1997; Lange 2008; Fairclough 1995a, 1995b) is another common theme, with a significant number of references to film, and music lyrics.

On reflection, participants acknowledged that they tailor their biographies for a specific audience. This is in keeping with what was found by Goffman (1959): that individuals project identities based on their expected audiences. They also note that they are often not as cool or “exciting” in real life as they portray themselves to be in their Twitter biographies:

Laura

Yes, people only [choose] the interesting part of their lives in their bio. For example, mine talks about travelling yet I am now back in UL in the library, so not so exciting anymore

Siobhán

Yes I think people probably portray themselves as far more fun and easy-going on twitter. They probably try to emphasize the good things about themselves but in a subtle way.

The importance of this “desire to be liked, appreciated and approved” (Georgakopoulou 1997, p.152) was observed in other written discourse. Lisa offered an interesting, contrasting view to this idea that people do not show their ‘real’ selves online:

Lisa

Yes, I think people exaggerate online - both the good and the bad. I also think people can sometimes be more themselves online than in real life, especially politically.

Others hinted at people being more self-absorbed and attention-seeking online:

Brian

Obviously yes. Sure you can't describe yourself accurately in such a small amount of words. And there's the whole I'm class look at me thing

Ideas of reinventing the self (Bolter and Grusin 1999), or having different voices (Bakhtin 1981) were common:

Amy

Online gives you that opportunity for anonymity and to reinvent yourself so naturally some people will take advantage of [that]

James

Maybe they feel that they can have a Twitter voice and an offline voice

Students also noted that they felt greater expression to say whatever they wanted to online, as opposed to feeling more restricted saying certain things in person:

Amy

I declare my sexuality in my bio, not always as upfront about it in real life

David

I feel people are less afraid to say what's on their minds on twitter. They don't have to face [people's] reactions

Aoife

Yes. There are things that people feel freer to say online rather than in person, so it stands to reason that this works for self-perception too [...] It depends also on the purpose of the account - is it personal (for friends to see) or business oriented (as a public persona) or political etc? Someone using a political account might describe themselves as open to debate in person, but block or ignore people online.

However, Aoife also noted that the reverse of this was true, and that she wouldn't say everything she would say in person online:

Aoife

I'm more openly opinionated online than I am in person, but there are many things that I would not say on the Internet that I would say in person.

The biographies analysed also show tendencies to ignore fundamental rules of writing, suggesting that the social media environment of Twitter does not necessarily require strict adherence to the more traditional grammar and relevance rules outlined by Strunk and White (2000) and Yule (2010). This can be seen in the use of foreign languages, unorthodox spellings, and punctuation mistakes, all of which conflict with Strunk and White's (2010) writing rules. Code-switching (Sophocleous and Themistocleous 2014; Holmes 2008; Georgakopoulou 2013, 1997) and style-switching (Sophocleous and Themistocleous 2014; Yule 2010; Georgakopoulou 1997) are regularly used, despite the length constraints of Twitter biographies, with some users using both English and Latin, French, Irish or German,

and others switching from factual, polite and informative styles to vulgar language or text speak. Many of these writing styles convey a “desire to reinforce solidarity” and alliances with certain groups (Georgakopoulou 1997, p.156), for example, speakers of Irish.

Notably, some who did not have Twitter biographies noted that they “don’t tend to ‘advertise’” themselves online or “make an impression” of themselves “in that way”. This in itself can say a lot about the user: they may not wish for people to read about the kind of person they are online, or project certain aspects of themselves obviously by including them in a social media profile, or they may, as one user noted in relation to herself, be “very private”. “Choice entails exclusion as well as inclusion”, according to Fairclough (1995a, p.210), so deciding to have an empty or not so ‘informative’ Twitter biography sends a message to Twitter users just as much as when users fill in all 160 characters. Significantly, whether they intend to or not, in reducing the amount of information they share on Twitter, they may be projecting to other users that they are quite private people, at least in online environments.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study aimed to explore and compare how students perceive themselves, and how they represent themselves on Twitter. The study shows that students represent themselves in many different ways in their Twitter biographies. Their varying representations are partially due to the 160-character limit of the biographies, and are largely dependent on who Twitter users believe is their target audience – who they think might potentially be interested in their profile, and who they wish to appeal to. The variation here is caused by Twitter users aiming their content at audiences ranging from just close friends, to anyone in the world who shares their interests, to potential employers, though the latter viewers of social media profiles do not appear to be as important for current students as they are for graduates (Roche 2014).

6.2 Limitations

The study was limited in terms of the number of participants, and with regard to how the data was collected. Students were also able to give very short answers in their descriptions, and reflections on the study, as no minimum character limit was applied to these questions. All data was collected online, whereas interviews or a focus group with a small sample of the participants may have uncovered further discoveries, or more explanations for the findings. However, this research gives important insights into how users represent their selves on Twitter, and why.

6.3 Conclusions

Though not always the case, students' online self-representations can be vastly different to how they actually perceive themselves to be. This can be caused by Twitter users trying to highlight just one aspect of themselves in their biographies, and by the very nature of these biographies allowing users to say whatever they like, sometimes leading users to simply include a quote they enjoy, or links to other sites or profiles. Knowing that their biographies are public, users often try to utilise them to impress fellow Twitter users, which may lead to people being less true to their real selves.

6.4 Recommendations

As this research suggests, social media-based discourse analysis can give fascinating insights into how people present themselves online, and comparing people's online and offline identities can show huge differences in how they behave in both environments. Further study could investigate whether the findings – the ways of representing the self online versus how a person perceives their self, and the reasons for certain kinds of self-representations – change depending on particular factors, such as a person's age, nationality, native-language, culture, education or upbringing. As some of this study's participants pointed out, analysis of users' tweets might give more of an insight into how they represent themselves online. Quantitative research on biographies or tweets could yield different results. Study could also be done on different internet platforms, comparing social media sites, and other tools such as blogs, websites and forums, to investigate whether users of any of these media in particular portray themselves in a more accurate or 'real' manner, closer to how they actually represent their selves offline. On the basis of this investigation, however, it can be hypothesized that humour, intertextuality, intended audience, the desire for attention, or indeed privacy, the level of perceived anonymity and freedom of expression, and alliance construction would play a central role in identity construction and self-representation on other mediums.

As social media sites such as Twitter become increasingly commonplace in today's society, people will most likely seek and create new ways of presenting and even marketing themselves in the highly visible online world. Analysing self-representation on social media is one way to understand how individuals change their behaviours and identities online, as well as their desires about how they wish to be perceived in these public spaces. Whether they use zero characters, or up to 160, people send clear messages about themselves to the world.

Appendices

Appendix A – Survey Questions

Page 1

Survey Information and Eligibility

If you do not have a personal Twitter account, you can not participate in this survey.

This questionnaire is designed to investigate how 18-25 year olds portray themselves online and offline. It should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. There are 4 short sections. All information will be treated with confidentiality. By completing the questionnaire, you are indicating your consent to participate.

FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

INFORMATION LETTER

1. This study, entitled ‘Self-perception and self-representation in Twitter Biographies’ intends to investigate and collect (using an online questionnaire) information on how people portray themselves online, using participants’ own perceptions of themselves, and their Twitter biographies. As a participant, I request your consent to collect and analyse your perceptions and analyse your Twitter biography using a questionnaire. This information will be used to investigate people’s online and offline identities.
2. There are no risks to you as a participant. Participation or non-participation is voluntary and will have no influence on your grades. This project is not attached to your programme of study. Benefits include further awareness of online and offline identity and contribution to an under-researched area of study involving Twitter biographies.

3. Your name will not be used in the stages of data analysis. All participants will be assigned pseudonyms (even if they are already using a pseudonym on Twitter) and your identity will not be disclosed. The only information to be taken from consenting participants' Twitter pages is what is displayed publicly in their biographies and this will be anonymised for the analysis.

4. As a participant, you have the right to withdraw from this project at any time. If you have any concerns regarding participation in this research, you can contact the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

5. You may contact the following at any time:

Researcher: Sarah Caulfield

Phone: 0857562774

E-mail: 12125512@studentmail.ul.ie

Supervisor: Dr Helen Kelly-Holmes

Phone: +353 61 23 4206

E-mail: helen.kelly.holmes@ul.ie

This research study has received Ethics approval from the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (2015-12-30-AHSS). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent authority, you may contact:

Chairperson Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

AHSS Faculty Office

University of Limerick

Phone: +353 61 202286

E-mail: FAHSSEthics@ul.ie

1. Please enter your Twitter username below if you consent to have your Twitter biography used for research purposes. All information will be treated with confidentiality. Participants' names and usernames will be replaced by pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. No other information from your Twitter account will be used other than what is publicly displayed in your biography.

If you do not wish to provide your username, or if you are not aged 18-25, you do not need to continue with this survey. Thank you for your time.

Page 2

Section 1: Background Information

2. What year of third-level education are you in?

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

Other (please specify)

3. What discipline do you study?

Business

Education

Health Sciences

Science

Engineering

Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

Other (please specify)

Page 3

Section 2: Self-perception

4. Describe yourself in approximately 25 words or less. (You may use structured sentences, phrases or words, or a combination of these.)

Section 3: Twitter Use

5. How long have you been using Twitter for?

Less than 1 year

1 year

2 years

3 years

4 years

5 years

6 years

7 years

8 years

9 years

6. How often do you usually use Twitter?

Several times a day

About once a day

At least once a week

At least once a month

Less than once a month

Almost never

Comments (optional)

Section 4: Opinions

7. Who do you think your Twitter biography is written for and what is its purpose?

8. Do you think there are differences between how people see themselves and portray themselves to others offline, and how they portray themselves in their Twitter biographies? Please explain.

9. Are there any differences between your 25-word description of yourself in Section 2 and your Twitter biography?

If you answer yes, why do you think there are differences?

Appendix B

Pseudonyms

In order to maintain anonymity, participants have been assigned pseudonyms. The pseudonyms, and their corresponding participant number, used for the answers (see Appendix C), are listed below:

1. Emma
2. Clodagh
3. Stephen
4. Aoife
5. Laura
6. Kate
7. Ciaran
8. Kevin
9. Rebecca
10. Lisa
11. Jack
12. David
13. James
14. Mark
15. Sinéad
16. Andrew
17. Chloe
18. Brian
19. Ciara

20. Jennifer
21. Áine
22. Siobhán
23. Niamh
24. Ian
25. Seán
26. Amy

Appendix C – Survey Answers

Question 1 (Page 1 of the survey)

Survey Information and Eligibility

In the absence of answers for this question (as usernames have been removed, and replaced with pseudonyms throughout the study, in order to maintain anonymity), the data collected from the participants' biographies are listed below:

Biographies

1. Lorde truther. Oxford comma enthusiast. Future UL graduate.
2. 4th Year Applied Languages @UL (French & German) / Cast Member @DisneylandParis / PRO @ULIntSociety / President @ULFrenchSoc. #Snapchat [@SnapchatUsername]
3. Worrying is like a rocking chair, gives you something to do but gets you no where!
4. Book-lover and movie-quoter, accent-thrower and coffee-drinker, nostalgia-tripper and constant dancer. Ita quod, sum stupenda.
5. Have I mentioned that time I backpacked South America? How about when I lived in Argentina? Well have I mentioned I studied in France? yeah? Oh,so,the weather?
6. Always looking for people to make me tea ☕ Thought doing a masters would be fun... it's not. Want time difference to stop being a hindrance!
7. 22. Corkman. Student of Gaeilge, Français and Deutsch at UL. Gaeilgeoir. Member of Fine Gael. Politics. Cork City FC and Tottenham Hotspur. All views mine.
8. Man muss die Dinge nehmen, wie sie kommen.
- 9.
10. Final year Language, Literature and Film student. Reader, reviewer, caffeine addict.
11. My dominant physique has ruined many a young lad on the hurling pitch and many a young one in bed!!!!
12. Product Design student, guitar player, expert hand washer- Slane 2015 LAD

13. A linguist.Hopeless romantic.Dreamer. Big cock.
14. idk what im doing
15. I'm not creative enough for a clever and witty bio.
16. Studying Computer Games Development in UL. [@TwitterUser] is amazing and smells like rainbows x
- 17.
18. When you try hard, that's when you die hard. I have many leather bound books and my apartment smells of rich mohagany. 18/UL
- 19.
- 20.
21. daydream believer
22. World traveler and word nerd, studying languages. Reading, music, gym, traveling. Finishing up Uni soon, where to next?
23. I don't believe in lipstick that isn't red. Medieval History student, strugglin hotel receptionist, all-round train wreck.
24. Les femmes la bas, c'est pas de joie [<http://Instagram.com/Ian>]
25. that me leaf
26. 21. Irish. Final year music student. // GayeR than expected. // three underscores. //

Question 2 (Page 2 of the survey)

Section 1: Background Information

Question

2. What year of third-level education are you in?

Answers

1. 4
2. 4
3. 4
4. 4
5. 4
6. 5
7. 4
8. 4
9. 4
10. 4
11. 5
12. 4
13. 4
14. 1
15. 3
16. 3
17. 4
18. 1
19. 4
20. 4
21. 4
22. 4
23. 3

- 24. 3
- 25. 4
- 26. 4

Question 3 (Page 2 of the survey)

Section 1: Background Information

Question

3. What discipline do you study?

Answers

- 1. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- 2. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- 3. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- 4. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- 5. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- 6. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- 7. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- 8. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- 9. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- 10. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- 11. Business
- 12. Science

13. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
14. Science
15. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
16. Science
17. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
18. Business
19. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
20. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
21. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
22. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
23. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
24. Business
25. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
26. Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

Question 4 (Page 3 of the survey)

Section 2: Self-perception

Question

4. Describe yourself in approximately 25 words or less. (You may use structured sentences, phrases or words, or a combination of these.)

Answers

1. I'm a 21 year old Irish student of languages. I enjoy consuming things: news, literature, chocolate, and almost any content on the internet.
2. Student, Francophile, Internet addict, avid tweeter, language learner
3. A 21 year old Irish student who loves travelling and a good time.
4. Ambitious, kind, generous, usually easy going, passionate, bubbly, enthusiastic, occasionally selfish, reserved but outwardly friendly, snobbish, confident.
5. Outgoing, athletic, upbeat and friendly
6. Opinionated. Lazy, but in a good way. An idealist, looking to change the world through politics. Considerable amount of wit. Love music.
7. Intelligent, conscientious, perceptive, quick, highly opinionated, sometimes funny.
8. I am a gas person who loves what they do
9. languages student with plans of becoming a teacher. outgoing and chatty student
10. I am a 4th year English student. Originally from Cork but attending college in Limerick. I pass my time reading, writing and crafting.
11. Tall, friendly, big into sport , outgoing, love going out, have ambition to have a good job and someday settle down
12. Positive attitude although sometimes lacks motivation, trys to make people laugh and is currently trying to live a healthier lifestyle. Im open-minded
13. Confident,nice,hard working,can be funny at times,can be serious at times
14. Average nerdy teenager with interest in music and popular science.
15. quiet at first becoming increasingly weirder as you get to know me
16. shy, awkward, weird
17. I would think of myself as outgoing, friendly and calm.
18. Sound. Easy going. Clever. A jolly good fellow

19. I'm hardworking, friendly and caring. I love spending time with my family and close friends. I've got the travel bug!
20. love meeting people but have a desire to be liked that can lead to shyness. Easily stressed but getting better at coping
21. Fair, try to be funny, political, kind,
22. Serious, bookish, impulsive, secretive, loyal, trustworthy, sensitive, introverted, intuitive, pessimistic, self-doubting, perfectionist, idealist, impatient.
23. witty, independent, self-depreciating, extroverted
24. Outgoing, a bit quiet, hard working, friendly, intelligent
25. Motivated, kind, sarcastic, open, friendly, relaxed
26. Enthusiastic, a little bit weird, a little bit lost.

Question 5 (Page 4 of the survey)

Section 3: Twitter Use

Question

5. How long have you been using Twitter for?

Answers

1. 7 years
2. 7 years
3. 4 years
4. 4 years
5. 3 years

6. 7 years
7. 5 years
8. 2 years
9. 4 years
10. 5 years
11. 2 years
12. 5 years
13. 4 years
14. 6 years
15. 5 years
16. 5 years
17. 3 years
18. 6 years
19. 3 years
20. Less than 1 year
21. 5 years
22. 7 years
23. 8 years
24. 6 years
25. 6 years
26. 7 years

Question 6 (Page 4 of the survey)

Section 3: Twitter Use

Question

6. How often do you usually use Twitter?

Answers

1. Several times a day
2. Several times a day
3. At least once a week
4. About once a day
5. At least once a week
6. Several times a day
7. Several times a day
8. About once a day
9. About once a day
10. At least once a week
11. Several times a day
12. At least once a week
13. At least once a month
14. Several times a day
15. About once a day
16. At least once a month
17. At least once a month
18. Several times a day

19. Almost never
20. About once a day
21. Several times a day
22. At least once a week
23. Several times a day
24. Several times a day
25. Several times a day
26. Several times a day

Comments (optional): Have gone extended periods of not using Twitter. But when I do use it it's a couple times a day.

Question 7 (Page 5 of the survey)

Section 4: Opinions

Question

7. Who do you think your Twitter biography is written for and what is its purpose?

Answers

1. I think it's written for people who are considering following me. It's purpose is to attract new followers, and maybe inform current followers. People can also use their Twitter bios to speak to a specific audience. For example, I change my bio quite often, and sometimes my bio is simply a quote I particularly like from a show I'm watching. Therefore, only a small number of people would understand the reference in my bio, and they would then know if they share a common interest with me.
2. To give my followers an insight into what I tweet about

3. For others as it's a gas quote that my dad told me and I tell it to others all the time.
4. My friends and followers, to give them an idea of my outlook on life and personality.
5. My account is private so just for friends and I think it's funny and hope others do
6. For myself and any who cares enough to be interested. Also in a bid to find someone who'll actually make me tea
7. It is written for me and anybody who happens to check my profile. I have tailored mine so that people who have similar interests to me may follow me.
8. The people who may follow you, to give them a better insight into who you are.
- 9.
10. Originally set up as a twitter for my blog so was for my blog readers. Now it's just for fun.
11. Just a funny joke between me and a few friends
12. Initially your close friends. To give a quick idea of your personality.
13. For fun,to give an insight into the person writing it
14. To garner attention of other users and alert them on what your tweets will be like, or what your personality may be.
15. For your followers and potential followers to give them an idea of what your tweets might be about
16. People looking at my profile. To give a brief summary of a person
- 17.
18. Just a bit of Craic. Show personality and take the piss out of narcissistic lads
19. I never really thought about it. I suppose for people who want to follow me , to give them a sense that I'm an real person (not a catfish :P) and learn a little about me
20. To let other people know about me - who I am, my interests etc.
21. It's written for anyone who happens to see my tweets, but it's not especially enlightening. I think I want people to follow me because of my tweets rather than because I have a funny bio etc

22. To give people an idea of who you are and what you're interested in.
23. it's written for people who do not follow my account and who may not know me. To me, the purpose of a biography is to give an impression of what the content of the account will be eg if it's a primarily witty account, the bio will show that.
24. It has many purposes, it's really up to the user. Mine is a line from The Vaccines song 'Wreckin' Bar Ra' Ra' Ra' Ra" in French which kinda summarises how I am at the moment and my general fluency in French.
25. For myself, mainly. It's a funny joke I found on Tumblr so if anyone gets it they might find it funny too! I don't really take Twitter seriously enough to have a normal bio, it's more like a tagline to me.
26. It's for other people to read so they can know more about me/the kind of Twitter I am

Question 8 (Page 5 of the survey)

Section 4: Opinions

Question

8. Do you think there are differences between how people see themselves and portray themselves to others offline, and how they portray themselves in their Twitter biographies? Please explain.

Answers

1. I definitely think there's a difference. I think some people feel a lot more free to portray who they aspire to be in their Twitter biographies. People can be funny in a different way, because Twitter is full of far more diverse, but at the same time, like-minded people. People can also use their Twitter bios to speak to a specific audience. For example, I change my bio quite often, and sometimes my bio is simply a quote I particularly like from a show I'm watching. Therefore, only a small number of people

would understand the reference in my bio, and they would then know if they share a common interest with me.

2. It varies, some people have straight forward factual bios and others have a joke or even a song lyric which doesn't say much about themselves
3. Well others do it but I don't take myself seriously that much so it's a bit of craic I think but others take it seriously I suppose.
4. Yes. There are things that people feel freer to say online rather than in person, so it stands to reason that this works for self-perception too. I'm more openly opinionated online than I am in person, but there are many things that I would not say on the Internet that I would say in person. It depends also on the purpose of the account - is it personal (for friends to see) or business oriented (as a public persona) or political etc? Someone using a political account might describe themselves as open to debate in person, but block or ignore people online.
5. Yes, people only chose the interesting part of their lives in their bio. For example, mine talks about travelling yet I am now back in UL in the library, so not so exciting anymore
6. One hundred per cent definitely is. I guess they don't like who they are in real life or that society doesn't give themselves the chance to be who they are, so social media becomes their outlet. Luckily enough I don't care too much about what people think about me online so I tend not to change myself, maybe when I was younger I did can't remember.
7. Yes. I think people often quote famous people in their Twitter biographies to give themselves an air of superiority and to show a background of good education, but I think these people look pretentious. People also often use certain words to describe themselves when it is not a word that accurately describes them. It seems that creating a falsified online persona is quite common.
8. Yes they are usually like...wanderlust etc when they've really only been to like 3 countries
- 9.

10. Yes, I think people exaggerate online - both the good and the bad. I also think people can sometimes be more themselves online than in real life, especially politically.
11. Yes your biography is only something that sums you up shortly and is not taken seriously
12. I feel people are less afraid to say what's on their minds on twitter. They don't have to face people's reactions
13. Maybe they feel that they can have a Twitter voice and an offline voice
14. Definitely. Twitter is a much more relaxed social media platform so I think people portray themselves as a more "carefree" individual. No user really takes themselves seriously on Twitter.
15. People may want to portray themselves as being more cool or hipster in their twitter bio because twitter is a bit more of a hipster type site compared to other social media
16. yes. The biography is only a small snippet of the person and doesn't describe everything about them.
- 17.
18. Obviously yes. Sure you can't describe yourself accurately in such a small amount of words. And there's the whole I'm class look at me thing
19. Yes definitely. I'd imagine people do/say things online that they wouldn't in a real life situation. This could be for the better or worse.. for example - online bullying . I can't imagine people saying such horrible things to a person's face but they would say it online. Or like online dating .. people may come across really outgoing and confident which might not necessarily be the case.
20. Yes. Twitter has an anonymity to it that isn't there offline, or even on Facebook. That anonymity lets people feel like they can say anything in their bio, be it how they see themselves or how they would like to be seen
21. To an extent. As a microblogging platform Twitter lets you share your thoughts and generally be personal if you want to be, so the biographies can be flippant because the actual content is in the tweets.

22. Yes I think people probably portray themselves as far more fun and easy-going on twitter. They probably try to emphasize the good things about themselves but in a subtle way.
23. I don't think there's any intentional differences but it is difficult to judge a person's entire character from their twitter bio, it's also difficult to fit a person's entire character into a twitter bio.
24. Yes definitely in some cases. For instance some younger users might be part of a fandom which they'll socialise with others in it, whereas in real life it wouldn't be shown in their online persona to that extent.
25. Not so much in their biographies, but definitely in their tweets.
26. Online gives you that opportunity for anonymity and to reinvent yourself so naturally some people will take advantage of that

Question 9 (Page 5 of the survey)

Section 4: Opinions

Question

9. Are there any differences between your 25-word description of yourself in Section 2 and your Twitter biography?

If you answer yes, why do you think there are differences?

Answers

1. Yes; my actual Twitter bio is: "Lorde truther. Oxford comma enthusiast. Future UL graduate.". In this, the only real personal information is that I attend UL. The reference to the oxford comma may show my interest in linguistics, but that depends on whether the person reading actually knows what an oxford comma is!

2. There are a lot of similarities but in my Twitter bio I link to other accounts I use as a reference
3. Yes, cause a quote doesn't describe yourself. But at the same time it manages to portray to people who visit your page which type of person you are. I took this survey somewhat serious as its for a friends research, that's the difference I think.
4. Yes. In my personal description I included "negative"/realistic traits. I can be quite snobbish. However, I don't refer to this in my bio because people don't tend to think of snobbishness positively. (I don't think it's a bad thing, but many people talk viciously about "notions" which is, in my opinion a vicious, nasty kind of begrudgery. I have high standards.) No matter how private an account is, it is still open to criticism and judgement, which is pleasant to avoid.
5. I forgot to mention that I'm interested in travelling but other than that, no because I don't care too much about my twitter
6. Well ya I suppose but when I was writing that I didn't think about it as much as I did for this, plus it changes a lot so its not set in stone. I think if you actually read my tweets and not my biography you'd see those things that I wrote here more so.
7. I made no mention of football or politics (save for the mention of the fact that I am opinionated) in my description of myself here, but my Twitter bio is largely about three major themes: my course of study and the languages I study; football; and politics.
8. yes my languages, what i study, they are basically totally different
- 9.
10. Yes, my Twitter Bio doesn't give much info.
11. Yes clear difference
12. Yes. I wasn't really directly describing myself personally. Just describing things that I do and threw in that I was going to Slane lad
13. Yes, Twitter is more of an online tongue in cheek me

14. Yes. I don't take Twitter seriously but enjoy it more than other social media as I can generally follow and be followed by people more similar to me. However in a more formal situation like this I'd try to take it more seriously
15. yes, I wrote my bio ages ago
16. to seem more appealing to potential followers
- 17.
18. Yes because one is for a survey and the other is an opportunity to take the piss. (I don't really have many leather bound books)
19. I can't find my twitter bio but I certainly don't think it's the same as my 25 word description. I don't tend to 'advertise' myself online. All my social media accounts are very private.
20. I don't have a Twitter biography as I don't like to make an impression of myself in that way
21. Yes. I think again because the reasons people will follow other (non-famous) people is because of their actual tweets, rather than the biography. So I'd prefer people to form their opinions on my tweets rather than on my perception of myself.
22. Very much. In my twitter I just talk about what I study and my interests whereas in the word-description I described my personality. This doesn't really tell people anything they can use to connect to you, like interests etc. and would probably seem a little narcissistic to put up as a bio.
23. No. I don't think there are any.
24. Yeah, Section 2 was just general buzzwords I'd characterise myself as, a twitter bio really reflects what your purpose on twitter is.
25. Well yes, but in large part because of the fact that my bio isn't strictly a bio. That said, the information I would put in wouldn't be the same -- I would put information like my age and what I do (studies/work etc) rather than a description of myself, which I would probably expect people to deduce from my tweets.
26. I declare my sexuality in my bio, not always as upfront about it in real life

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