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The visible #family: Using the hashtag to study family construction

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The Visible #Family: Using the Hashtag to Study Family Construction

by

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Thesis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to see, through a raw collection of data, how the family is currently being portrayed on social networking sites. Twitter is used to examine the social construction of family based upon observing tweets that contain #family. This paper argues that the family is best understood as being constructed through interactions with others, using symbolic interaction theory for theoretical grounding. Through examining over 1,000 tweets using a grounded theory methodological approach, three main themes emerged: family types, statements of family, and the esoteric family. The emergent themes suggest several implications, including that the family is portrayed on Twitter with utopian and fantasized characteristics. Furthermore, people, with the help of social networking sites such as Twitter, are now taking an observable role in defining family, where the layperson—in addition to the scholar—visibly influences what society is learning about the family. Therefore, the interactional nature of Twitter will continue to contribute to the meanings and definitions society holds on the term *family*. The full extent of these implications is discussed, along with limitations and suggestions for future research.

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Introduction

Some times the most beautiful thing is breathing another day with loved ones. #family #friends

There is nothing more important and better than #family

When we pull into Tim Hortons just to do a search for the closest Starbucks #family

While social networking sites are beginning to take preference in today's society (Kane, Robinson-Combre, & Berge, 2010; Walther & D'Addario, 2001; Watters, 2011), many of these social networking sites are offering different features and gimmicks to draw users. One such unique social networking site is Twitter, which serves as a place for people to connect with one another using 140-character status updates called tweets. Twitter made popular the use of the hashtag, which uses what is commonly referred to as the number or pound sign (#), combining it with a word or a short phrase, with no spaces #separatingthewords. The hashtag is a way for people to interact with one another on social networking sites about specific topics—users can create a new hashtag simply by using an original hashtag in a tweet.

This paper argues that Twitter, with the use of #family, captures how people portray family definitions. Previous research that has examined family construction has not used a medium such as Twitter to see firsthand the communication surrounding the construction of the family; much could be learned by using the hashtag as a means of studying family construction.

The literature review first examines the concept of family. Three sub-areas are explored: family definitions, family configurations, and family on social networking. In family definitions, the review of literature shows how research has attempted to conceptually understand family definitions. The next area, family configurations, shows how the concept of the family can be seen through a series of configurations. Often, however, these configurations can be quite

complex, urging researchers to explore other options when studying family construction. The last area, family uses of social networking, will demonstrate how researchers have studied family in the context of social networking.

The second half of the literature review will demonstrate the importance of Twitter, along with discussing the interactional component of the hashtag. Following this, this study is then grounded in Symbolic Interaction (SI) theory, which claims that people form meanings based upon interactions with one another (Mead, 1934). Thus, the literature review aims to show the connection between four ideas: family, social networking sites, the hashtag, and symbolic interaction theory—demonstrating that Twitter can capture the social construction of family.

The results demonstrate how Twitter allows for many different voices to contribute to the construction of the family. Twitter allows for people to exhibit their portrayals of family, allowing for the construction of family to be put on display for everyone to see. Thus, with the aid of Twitter, family construction is now observable. This study aims to draw out implications and directions for future research that communication scholars can utilize.

Family Fortune

In *family fortune*, there are three areas that are explored: *family definitions*, *family configurations*, and *family uses of social networking sites*. In *family definitions*, attempts made by scholars and the layperson to define the family will be examined. I argue that the family is best defined through an interactive, constructional approach. Following this, *family configurations* will reveal the complexity of family, and how this complexity can blur the boundaries that encompass family definitions. Finally, *family uses of social networking sites* examines how scholars have attempted to study the family on social networking sites; this section argues that more family communication research needs to be conducted by directly examining the interactions that take place on social networking sites.

Family Definitions

Several research studies have examined the way that families interact. Within these articles, there are many definitions of family (Baxter et al., 2009; Holtzman, 2008; Tillman & Nam, 2008). What “constitutes ‘family’ var[ies] across groups and societies” (Tillman & Nam, 2008, p. 367), making family definitions a difficult issue. Furthermore, within research studies that contain family definitions, there is a “tension between conceptual and operational definitions” (Floyd, Mikkelsen, & Judd, 2006, p. 24). The following examples illustrate this point: Uddin (2008) defined a family as a unit of people who are joined by blood, marriage, or adoption, yet only sampled couples who considered themselves husband and wife; O’Keefe (1973) stated that there are many variables that could expand the definition of a family unit, but for the purposes of the study a family was defined as an interpersonal relationship comprised of husband-wife or parent-child; Rose, Bush, and Kahle (1998) sought to examine family communication patterns, but only used a mother-daughter sample; Tillman and Nam (2008)

narrowed their definition of family to three specific definitions before conducting their study. In these examples, the research becomes more focused on specific aspects of family definitions, illustrating that operational definitions are needed to conduct family communication studies, since conceptual definitions of family can vary.

The tension between operational definitions and conceptual definitions, however, will not be the focus of this literature review. There will always be examples of communication studies that operationalize the definition of the family in order to conduct research—this is a common research practice. Instead, this literature review will show how research has attempted to conceptually understand definitions of family, arguing that this study can enhance scholars current understanding of family definitions.

There have been many attempts by scholars to define the family in a specific sense. One such specific case is seeing the family as a set of dyads. Trost (1993) stated that all social groups can be broken down into dyads. The family, according to Trost, is no exception. One or multiple dyads can form a family; a family cannot exist as one single person. Thus, the dyadic perspective can include other family forms, including the nuclear family and the step-family (Levin & Trost, 2000). The nuclear family would consist of three dyads: two parent child dyads and one spousal dyad. Taken together, this would form one family.

The concept of the nuclear family is, in itself, an attempt at defining family. Murdock (1949) first developed the idea of the nuclear family. Murdock defined the nuclear family as “a married man and woman with their offspring” (p. 1). When one or more nuclear families were affiliated with one another, they were either a polygamous family (affiliated by a parent in common between the two nuclear families) or an extended family (affiliated by a married adult’s

nuclear family and his/her parents). Murdock argued that the nuclear family has universality to it: All other forms of family can be derived from the nuclear family.

While research agrees that the nuclear family has importance, research also recognizes that diverse family forms exist, extending beyond just the nuclear family. Many times, these diverse family forms find themselves in literature. Gilmore and Bell (2006) conducted a study on children's books, arguing that children's literature should be more diverse; it needs to better represent different constellations of a family. Gilmore and Bell cite statistical information of how family can mean much more than two parents and a child, stating that 32% of children do not live in that traditional family. Many of these children live with separated/divorced parents, lesbian/gay/bisexual parents, or adoptive parents (see also Case, Lin, & McLanahan, 2001). Because of this, research is beginning to pay more attention to homosexual families (see Rohy, 2012, Ross, 1988). Homosexual families further add to the complexity of defining the family. They also show how family definitions are fluid: They may change over time.

Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) offered reasons for how the concept of family has changed from the 1960s through the 1990s. These reasons include the increase of women in the workplace, a declining birthrate, and nonmarital cohabitation including premarital sex and out-of-wedlock childbearing. Additionally, Thornton and Young-DeMarco stated that there is rising emphasis on equality and tolerance, thus allowing for more diverse forms of family. Since more emphasis is placed on egalitarianism beliefs, the concept of family is becoming more and more complex.

While this may be true, research continues to find that people define family in the traditional sense (Holtzman, 2008; Levin, 1993)—or the traditional family is still perceived as salient. Studies that have been replicated over time support this assertion. Trost (1990) surveyed

nearly 1,000 people living in Sweden to see what perceptions of family existed. In 99% of the responses, a married couple with a child was considered a family. Of all scenarios asked by Trost, “almost everyone included a married or cohabiting couple with children in the concept of family—the nuclear family” (p. 435). This salience of the traditional family does not seem to go away as time progresses.

Four years later, Ford (1994) replicated Trost’s (1990) study, this time using U.S. university students (Trost used participants ranging in age from 20-59 years old). Ford surveyed participants to see if they considered a married couple with a child to be a family. As was the case in Trost’s study, the percentage of people who saw the married couple with a child as a family was higher than any other scenario asked by Ford. Thus, even with a time gap and different participants, the salience of the traditional family remained.

This study was yet again replicated. This time, 15 years had elapsed since Ford (1994). Baxter et al. (2009) wanted to see if perceptions of the family had changed since Trost (1990) conducted his study. While keeping the core of the study intact, Baxter et al. added seven new scenarios to account for a “fuller range of alternative family forms” (p. 175). Baxter’s et al. findings were very similar to Trost’s and Ford’s findings. The top ranked family-form was the nuclear family (2 parents and one child); the childless homosexual couple received one of the lowest rankings of family status. Thus, in all three of these replicated studies, the traditional family was still ranked high. Even with these findings, Baxter et al. argued that the research community should not define family only in the traditional sense, as this will “marginalize our understanding of alternative family forms” (p. 186). Instead, Baxter et al. stated that future research should be exploring the alternative family forms and comparing them to traditional family forms.

Research studies that examine the stepfamily also find a preference for the traditional family. Levin (1993) argued that research often compares the stepfamily with the nuclear family. The nuclear family is seen as the norm, whereas the stepfamily is seen as the “other.” Stepfamilies are compared against nuclear families, and not the other way around. Thus, the nuclear family has become what Braten (1983) called the “model monopoly.” A model monopoly occurs when one universal perspective is used to describe a complex reality (as cited in Levin, 1993). If the family can be reduced to simply the nuclear family, this would result in a model monopoly. Trost (1993) also cannot avoid the model monopoly; since family is presented as a dyadic view, Trost was describing a complex reality through one particular view.

The findings of Trost (1990), Ford (1994), and Baxter et al. (2009) might make it easy to assume that there can be a clear and definitive definition of family: the traditional family. But as Gilmore and Bell (2006) pointed out, 32% of children do not live in a traditional family. Consider what Holstein and Gubrium (1999) said:

In responding to the question “What is family?” we argue that family is not objectively meaningful—that it does not take on the substantive contours of a specific ideal, past or present. Instead, we maintain that it is constantly under construction, obtaining its defining characteristics somewhere, somehow, in real time and place, through interpretive practice. (p. 4)

Holstein and Gubrium assumed that the family is a social construct—people define and determine what is and what is not family. Thus, family becomes highly interpretive. Holstein and Gubrium argued that the important part is to understand how “this situated process of interpretation gets transmitted into concrete domestic life” (p. 4).

This “constructionist approach” is what will be used for the premise of this paper. Much of family is constructed through meanings. Later, a review of symbolic interaction (SI) theory will be discussed. Much of SI is grounded in the meanings created through construction. Therefore, this research will use the lens of this construction, viewing family as something that is highly interpretive, constructed, and used for “*accomplishing* the meaning of social bonds” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999, p. 5).

Family Configurations

With research unable to agree upon a definition of family, research has also begun to study family based upon configurations (Widmer, 2010). Family configurations see the family as a complex set of relationships, where the family can be composed in many different ways and forms (Widmer, Aeby, & Sapin, 2013). Widmer (2006) surveyed 229 college students, where participants were asked whom they considered to be a family member. While participants reported on average 9.8 family members, some participants reported nearly 70 family members. In another study, Widmer (2010) found that “the average number of significant family members is 8.6, living in 5.7 different households [... with] 19 distinct family types included” (p. 24). Widmer (2010) stated that family members are diverse, listing eight sample configurations of family. Many configurations include parents and siblings, but many also include friends. There are “pseudo-kinship” ties, in which friends and neighbors are included in family configurations (Widmer, 1999). The family can be configured based off the mother’s relatives, the father’s relatives, a combination of both the mother’s and father’s relatives, or neither the father’s relatives nor the mother’s relatives (Levin, 1993; Widmer, 2010). Thus, depending on what type of perspective one has, what constitutes a family can vary. This means that multiple configurations come from the same family. While Trost (1990), Ford (1994), and Baxter et al.

(2009) found that the family is often defined in a traditional or nuclear sense, Widmer (2010) stated that “[t]he ‘Family’ is at best confusing, at worst a gross scientific misconception, laden by normative biases stemming from a nostalgia for the nuclear family” (p. 2).

There are a few reasons why the nuclear family might be a scientific misconception.

First, Widmer (2010) explained “conjugal networks.” Conjugal networks are complex because they intermix with couples who are first-time married, separated, divorced, or simply courting. Within each of these contexts, configurations of the family will be shaped differently (Widmer, 2010). Additionally, what happens within each of these networks could have an effect on other people’s networks. Widmer stated that when couples are courting one another, this interferes with other network ties (such as parents or other friends). Stated another way, while the courting couple begins to form a strong connection, thus enhancing this particular network, the couple also may begin to see other network members (parents, friends) as less important. Divorce, separation, and remarriage also cause family network configurations to change. A child’s family network configuration often grows when his/her parents go through a divorce and remarriage. These particular family network configurations often go beyond the household and dyadic view of the family.

Secondly, families are interdependent and interconnected to one another (Widmer, 2006; Widmer, 2010; Widmer & Jallinoja, 2008). Interdependence deals with fulfilling one’s needs, whether this is financial, sexual, emotional, etc. People meet one another’s needs beyond the nuclear family. An individual may receive money from a great aunt, computer service from a cousin, or emotional support from a stepsister, while giving practical help to an uncle on his drinking habits. Thus, the individual is interdependent and interconnected to family members beyond the nuclear family. If the family could be trimmed to the nuclear family, it would have to

deal with interdependence and interconnectedness. This is simply not possible without extending the family beyond the traditional sense.

Another way that research is studying family as configurations is by having participants in studies map out how they see their family. Cromwell, Fournier, and Kvebaek (1981) developed The Kvebaek Family Sculpture Technique (KFST), which has participants arrange family members by placing sculptures on a chessboard (as cited in Levin, 1993). Distances between blocks are supposed to show how emotionally attached each member is toward one another. Jorgenson (1986) also performed a similar experiment. Participants were asked to list their family members. Then, participants used cutout figures and a board, arranging figures by how close or how distant they were to each other. Levin (1993) also developed means of mapping the family, extending Cromwell's et al. and Jorgenson's research. Levin examined stepfamilies specifically by having participants map out their family now and also before moving in with their current stepfamily. This allowed Levin to compare and contrast different configurations of the family based upon the time period. In all of these research studies, participants were interviewed after to better understand why certain individuals were placed where they were. Jorgenson states that "[t]he verbal explanations accompanying the arrangements . . . reveal additional criteria by which the concepts of 'family' and 'closeness' are defined" (p. 44). Participants from the same family could map out a completely different family configuration. In Levin's research, the two different time periods help reveal how an individual's perception of family can change over time. Levin states that these studies help illustrate the complexity of the family, while also helping research better understand how the family is defined and used.

The configurationally perspective of the family allows research to study family as a social network (Widmer, 2010; Widmer et al., 2013). Widmer et al. (2013) stated that “[s]ocial network methods enable researchers to deal with some of the main challenges of family research” (p. 28). One of the main reasons that social network methods allow for this is because they broaden the definition of family. Instead of having family confined to the nuclear family or dyadic family, social networking methods allow researchers to see the entire complexity of the family.

Social networking methods also allow research to study people who are socially or psychologically vulnerable (Widmer et al., 2013). These types of people are often marginalized; social networking brings them into the mainstream population. Levin (1993) stated that “[d]efinitions of family should draw from the everyday world of the person” (p. 84). Social networking allows a variety of people to define the family. With a wide variety of people defining family, research can begin to holistically understand the complexity of the family.

The present study will examine family through a specific online social network: Twitter. Configurations of family help point out the complexity of the family, illustrating that family definitions are not easily categorized. Oftentimes, research insists upon placing boundaries around what is and what is not a family. The boundaries of family, however, remain unclear (Widmer et al., 2013). Through the use of a social networking site, this study aims to better understand the boundaries that encompass the family. Before doing so, how research is studying the family through social networking sites will be examined.

Family Uses of Social Networking Sites

Research is beginning to examine how families are using social networking sites. Within these studies, however, there is rarely research that examines how the family is *defined* on social

networking sites. Instead of using social networking sites to see first-hand how the layperson defines family, these studies examine how the family *uses* social networking sites. For example, aspects of how the family uses social networking sites include experiences of young adolescents (Williams & Merten, 2008; O’Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, Council on Communication and Media, 2011), young adults (Walker, Krehbiel, & Knoyer, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008; Szwedo, Mikami, & Allen, 2011 & 2012; Nwadiuko, Isbell, Zolotor, Hussey & Kotch, 2011), and mothers (McDaniel, Coyne, Holmes, 2012; Child & Westermann, 2013), among others.

Baghaei et al. (2011) developed *SOcial FAMilies (SOFA)*, a social networking system that was aimed to educate families about healthy living. This study demonstrates two things. First, Baghaei et al. demonstrated that research involving social networking sites is beginning to merge with research examining family. The main premise for Baghaei’s et al. study rested on the notion that there are individual social networking sites that teach about health, but none exist for the family. Therefore, a family-based¹ social networking health website was argued to be salient. Other research studies, such as an examination of how mothers and teens interact (Szwedo, Mikami, & Allen, 2011), also demonstrate how the family is being studied on social networking sites.

The second thing that *SOFA* reveals is that the definition of family is assumed to be commonly understood by all. For example, *SOFA* stated that it is a “family-oriented social network . . . [which] aims to engage the whole family” (Baghaei et al., 2011, pp. 974-975). It is not clear from this statement, however, what exactly accounts for the *whole* family, or even what family means.

¹ What is meant by the term “family-based” is not defined in the study.

This is the main schism that exists between the previous research and the current research. In previous studies that examine how the family uses social networking sites, the concept of the family is ambiguous, and must be interpreted by the individual readers of the study. Research needs to be taking a more direct approach at first understanding how users of social networking sites are defining family. The following example helps illustrate this ambiguity: Walker et al. (2009) examined comments on MySpace profiles to see what type of communication takes places with friends and family on social networking sites. Throughout the analysis, Walker et al. used the term “family,” but it was almost always coupled with the term “friend.” Thus, when reading the findings presented, it is hard to tell if the findings pertain to friends, family, or both friends and family. If the findings pertain to both, then Walker et al. was implying that there is little difference between friend and family definitions. In this example, what accounts for family is hard to determine. In another study, Subrahmanyam et al. (2008) found that over 50% of participants stated using social networking sites for staying in touch with “family.” However, just as in the Walker et al. study, it is impossible to determine what is meant by the term “family.” Thus, in these examples, the reader must assume the definition of family.

Furthermore, in studies that examine how the family uses social networking sites, the family is often portrayed, in some form or another, in a traditional sense. For example, there is much research that studies young adults and their online communication patters (Ledbetter, 2010; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2009). Within these studies, “family” is narrowed to the parent-child relationship. Thus, while these studies wish to better understand family communication patterns, narrowing the family to a parent-child dyad is somewhat limiting if we consider other cases of family.

Even though these studies only examine the parent-child context, research has also studied the family in other contexts as well. Often, however, these contexts are just as limiting as the ones before. Williams and Merten (2011) argued that “social media technology and the internet . . . may be a resource [for] strengthening family bonds” (p. 151). Williams and Merten interviewed “families” that lived in the same household, and thus used the household definition of the family in order to conduct their research. This would go in opposition to Trost’s (1993) argument that the family cannot be limited to just a household, but instead must be seen in dyadic forms. Therefore, instead of conforming to a specific framework of the family, this study will use Twitter to examine how different frameworks emerge.

Additionally, this research will directly examine how family is portrayed on Twitter. Walker et al. (2009) performed one of the few studies that directly read user profiles to examine family interactions. Other studies do not look directly at profiles, and instead conduct interviews or distribute surveys to young college students in order to research how social networking sites impact the family (see Child & Westermann, 2013; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Williams & Merten, 2008; Williams & Merten, 2011). While these studies provide some very good research, more research needs to be consistent with Walker et al. and examine social networking sites directly. Most social networking profiles are public accounts (as opposed to private accounts), and this accessibility offers a very easy way for researchers to visibly examine how family is portrayed on social networking sites.

Social networking sites, in addition to being easily accessible, offer clues into family identity. Walker et al. (2009) “became curious about the specific role of social networking sites in the identity explorations of emerging adults” (p. 681). Williams and Merten (2008) asserted that “identity exploration is facilitated by online social networking” (p. 269). Szewo et al.

(2011) stated that social networking sites offer more opportunities for self-expression and interaction—both used in identity formation. Thus, social networking sites offer a place for identities to be formed. Williams and Merten reviewed 100 adolescent social networking profiles and found that when users posted about family, 37% were positive comments about parents and 22% were positive comments about siblings; 16% were negative comments about parents, while 2% were negative comments about siblings. The rest of the comments were considered neutral comments (neither positive nor negative). This gives insight into how adolescents use social networking sites to communicate with their peers about their families. From this, researchers are better able to understand *how* adolescents talk about their families, which offers researchers a better *understanding* of adolescent identity (Williams & Merten, 2008).

The current study examines how family is portrayed on the social networking site Twitter. In doing so, this study looks directly at Twitter to observe how people portray the family, allowing the social constructions of family to arise through the study. Through this process, this research gives more insights into how people form family identity.

Influences Part 1: Social Networking and Twitter

Social Networking

Social networking is a large part of the Web, growing daily with millions upon millions of people participating (Cha, 2010; Golbeck, 2007). People can participate for a variety of reasons. YouTube is more than just a place for people to watch the latest video; instead, it is a place where networking happens. People create accounts, share videos, post videos and create videos. Other social networking sites work similarly. Facebook allows users to post videos, pictures, and status updates. Just recently, Facebook claimed to have one billion active users (Newsroom, 2012). Other social media sites are not far behind. Twitter claimed to have over 140 million active users, with nearly 350 million tweets published per day (What is Twitter, 2012). Social networking has caught on, and doesn't seem to be going away soon.

According to Golbeck (2007), social media sites grow at a linear rate—new members are constantly being added. Goldbeck argued that while social media is not a new phenomenon, social networking is becoming more and more about forming social connections—and this *is* a newer phenomenon. These connections include friends of Facebook, followers on Twitter, or subscribers on YouTube.

The impact on individuals is being “felt all around us, even if you are not actively involved in social media” (Smith, 2009, p. 559). Social networking sites are unique in the sense that everyone around the world can interact through them. Social media then becomes an influence around the globe—wherever Internet access exists (Polson, 2011; Smith, 2009). Social networking is networking on the global scale. Polson (2011) argued that social media is creating a new global middle class. Polson defined the middle class “as a set of cultural practices rather

than a specific empirical condition” (p. 148). Cultures are practicing the use of social media—forming a new middle class of individuals.

This rise and salience of social networking must have a reason behind it. Cha (2010) conducted a survey with college students to see what the motives were behind using social networking sites. Cha found that college students spend more time on social networking sites and use them more frequently because of interpersonal utility (interactions with others).

These interactions with others lead to self-expression (Lim, Ting, Puspitasari, Prasetya, & Gunadi 2012). Livingstone and Brake (2010) stated that teenagers often decorate their bedroom wall to show their identity. Now, however, social networking sites are becoming the new bedroom wall. Users of social networking sites take time to set up their profiles to make sure that their image is correctly portrayed (Lim et al., 2012).

Even though Livingstone and Brake (2010) used the example of teenagers, Stroud (2008) stated that social networking sites are becoming age-neutral. In fact, on Facebook and MySpace, the largest numbers of users are those over 30 years old. A few reasons for this include the sense of belonging and business opportunities. Stroud urged: “Social networking is here to stay. The process of people communicating and exchanging information is one the oldest applications of the internet” (p. 287). Before long, social networking sites may expand beyond a “members only” society (Stroud, 2008). For example, email is not confined to only members; you do not have to be a member to communicate via email. Social networking sites, however, require people to be a member of a site. Social networking sites, if nonmember inclusive, may provide an even richer place for meaning creation.

Social networking sites do offer many opportunities for meaning creation, yet may also be the source of overexposure (Lim et al., 2012). Overexposure is providing too

much personal information, including photos and location updates. Lim et al. (2012) stated that sometimes users of social networking sites are exposing too much information about themselves. Lim et al. found three reasons why users of social networking sites are still willing to overexpose themselves: self-expression, need for attention, and popularity. Users of social networking sites use self-expression to make themselves feel better. They may be overexposing themselves in the process, but the desire of self-expression seems worth the exposure.

Overall, research demonstrates how social networking sites have become an influential part of society today. These sites are used in businesses, foreign countries, and individually. Many new and interesting findings can be discovered within specific social networking sites.

Twitter

Twitter has much functionality to it that makes it unique. Users are allowed to post 140-character (or less) status updates (called a tweet). There is no limit on the number of status updates a Twitter user can tweet about in a given day. Other users can *retweet* a message they enjoy, or *favorite* tweets they like.

Twitter is unique in the sense that it developed the use of the hashtag. Users use the hashtag to tweet about a particular subject. The hashtag makes it very easy for searches to be done because when a particular hashtag is searched, all public tweets containing that hashtag are revealed. Unless the profiles are set to private, Twitter users whose tweets contain hashtags instantaneously become public.² Searching becomes easier and much more narrow with the function of the hashtag.

² One does not have to be a follower of user profiles to see tweets that contain hashtags.

Because of these features, Twitter has become an important part of social networking. As already discussed above, Twitter has millions of active users and is becoming a “microphone for the masses” (Murthy, 2011, p. 779). Consider the past U.S. presidential election. Twitter’s blog reported that there were 31 million tweets on the Election Day alone (Sharp, 2012). At its highest point during Election Day, 327,425 tweets per minute were talking about the election (Sharp, 2012). The election was only a small part of Twitter’s usage, however.

Murthy (2011) argued that Twitter is significant because it allows for “citizen journalism” (p. 779). Twitter users report and spread news. Tweets about natural disasters spread faster than the news media can cover them in some instances. Users of Twitter are able to journal by more means than just using status updates filled with text - they are using photos as documentation as well. Thus, citizens are able to report news to each other through Twitter.

Twitter can also be used as a search tool, and the hashtag is not the only reason why this is the case. Ovadia (2009) stated that Twitter is being used as a search tool because it presents current information. Since Twitter is indexing current tweets constantly, people are able to find information in a chronological order. From this chronological search, Twitter is able to convey what the masses are saying about a particular event (Murthy, 2011; Ovadia, 2009).

Influences Part 2: Hashtags

Popular news seems to have more coverage of the hashtag than scholarly research. This is probably because of the relative newness of the hashtag. Within the small pool of scholarly information regarding hashtags, some interesting findings and arguments are presented. Page (2012) stated that hashtags are constructed, and this construction happens when people interact with one another on Twitter through conversation. These conversations can range from a school sports game to the most recent breaking news. People use hashtags to discuss these kinds of topics (Huang, Thorton, & Efthimiadis, 2010).

Small (2011) conducted a study on the hashtag #cdnpoli. Small stated that the hashtag has a significant influence on politics. Small argued that the mainstream media does not influence peoples' agendas as much as the blogosphere. Small stated that this is the case not only because bloggers are the first to report news, but also because bloggers are not afraid to challenge the position and mindset of traditional news sources. So Murthy's (2011) "citizen journalism" might be better phased as *influential* citizen journalism.

Since Twitter blogging (if it even can be called that with only 140-character tweets) can be argued to be journalism, hashtags become important for visibility. Page (2012) described hashtags as "crucial currency" (p. 184). Page reviewed hashtags on Twitter in a general sense, examining many different hashtags. Page was looking for ways that members use the hashtag to get the attention of their audience (other Twitter users). Page found that celebrities and corporations use hashtags to get their products or company features visible.

Overall, there are a few scholarly studies that address, specifically, the hashtag. If Twitter has so many users, and if people are using hashtags as a means of constructing ideas, reporting

and challenging news sources, more scholarly research needs to examine different uses of the hashtag on social networking sites.

Outside of scholarly research, more attention seems to be given to the hashtag in traditional news and blogs. A recent article from the New York Times, titled “Twitter’s Secret Handshake,” reports that businesses use the hashtag as a means for prize giveaways (Parker, 2011). Additionally, the article provided several examples of how the hashtag is finding itself in emails, face-to-face conversations, chat windows and even text messages. Although the hashtag may not be useful in a text message or a face-to-face conversation, Parker argued that the hashtag is something that is cool to use because of how popular it is on Twitter—thus people are beginning to use it everywhere. Thus, even though a hashtag cannot be clicked upon when texting or in face-to-face conversation, hashtags are finding themselves in more areas than just Twitter status updates. This is significant because it helps demonstrate how hashtags are influential, and their influence is not just contained within the parameters of Twitter; instead, the hashtag carries meaning outside of tweets.

Turner (2012), also reporting in the New York Times, stated that hashtags were originally just a way of categorizing tweets. Now, however, hashtags allow “for humor, darkness, wordplay, . . . and even poetry” (Turner, 2012, par. 4). Hashtags can range from goofy to elegant, and are becoming the new URL (Turner, 2012). Instead of seeing a URL for a website on the latest movie trailer, one might encounter a hashtag instead. Turner called the hashtag a “versatile tool” because of these many uses (par. 8).

Some hashtags are being used to accomplish a specific agenda. Consider the hashtag #SignsYoSonIsGay. This hashtag was originally supposed to be used for making humorous (to some) jokes about gays. For example:

#SignsYoSonIsGay he asks questions like ‘is this shirt cute?’

However, after some time, the original intent of this hashtag changed and became a place for the LGBT community to discuss homosexuality in a positive way (McGuire, 2012). People of the LGBT community began posting status updates like the following:

#SignsYoSonIsGay Wears shoes. Sometimes doesn’t. Occasionally eats cereal.

Likes to close windows in car when it starts raining. Etc.

In a few months, this hashtag could potentially be back to being used in the manner it was originally intended. This is the beauty of the hashtag: It has no boundaries. The way a particular hashtag functions and the meanings it portrays are controlled only by individuals and their interactions with one another. Meanings are constructed through the repeated use of hashtags.

Hashtags are also being used for specific purposes. Since Hurricane Sandy, which caused major destruction in the northwestern United States along with other parts of the world, Patch.com, a site dedicated to helping people participate in what’s going on near them, offered to donate \$1 for every tweet containing #PatchRebuilds (Jacobson, 2012). When hashtag #GazaUnderAttack was created, Israel quickly responded with their own hashtag: #PillarofDefense (Albright, 2012). A quick Internet search will reveal many other specific uses of the hashtag. These include Twilight spoilers, sports updates, new Disney movies, political coverage, and thanksgiving dinner giveaways. The above references show how the hashtag is becoming a popular means of communication. Each hashtag has meanings associated with it—and sometime those meanings change as time progresses. Hashtags are a means by which people interact (Small, 2011). From this interaction, each individual hashtag begins a process of meaning creation.

#TheoreticalGroundings

Symbolic interaction (SI), on its most basic level, argues that the self develops through interactions, specifically interactions with others. These *others* constitute the social world. Mead (1934) is attributed with beginning to see the self through this set of lenses. The self, according to Mead, does not exist at one's birth. Instead, the self is formed through a process of social experience. The self cannot arise without this social experience. This social experience happens with people on a daily basis. We form this sense of self when talking to the mail carrier, going on a first date, or watching our favorite television show. These are interactions with the social world—interactions which form our experiences which form our self. The self, then, is constantly being constructed. Mead called this construction “the framework of the self” (p. 163). Thus, just as Holstein and Gubrium (1999) pointed out that family is constructed, the construction of family can be best understood when viewing it through SI.

Although much of SI is originally credited to Mead (1934), Blumer (1969) helped in developing SI by breaking SI into three parts: meaning, language, and thought. Humans create meanings and act towards things based off of these meanings. These things include nearly everything: physical objects, human beings, etc. Things also include “categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies” (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). Family is a way to categorize humans—calling someone “a friend” is very similar to calling someone “a family member.” Thus, family would fall under categories of human beings. Since family is categorized, SI would propose that humans not only *create* these meanings, but they also *act* towards things based off of these meanings. Consider what Blumer penned:

The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person. (p. 4)

Two aspects are interesting about the above statement. First is growth. A person grows meanings based on interactions with others—growth and interaction are related to one another. Secondly, this statement implies that meanings, which are created based on interactions with others, begin to *define* things. Thus a person, through interactions with others, forms meanings of the word family and these meanings define family for this individual.

Relating this back to Twitter and the hashtag, Gusfield (2003) made a case that there seems to be a gap in SI when virtual interaction is addressed. Gusfield argued that SI helps explain face-to-face interactions, or “naturalistic forms” of interaction, but SI has not yet explained virtual interaction. Crossley (2010) also recognized that SI might be rejected in its application to the virtual world. Crossley stated that Mead generalizes others. A person is an actor engaging with others, but these others are reduced “to a single interlocutor” (p. 343). So emphasis is placed on dyadic interactions: actor and generalized other. But Crossley saw Mead’s work implying that society is complex, built on dyads where every actor has several relationships with others, and these others have relationships with others, etc. Thus, the application of SI can and should be expanded beyond just a dyadic view. As Crossley argued, others interact with others; therefore SI can help us understand these interactions. Much interaction with others occurs in the virtual world through social networking sites, and Crossley found it important to apply SI

to these sites. He stated that doing so would allow SI to “contribute to debates on complexity”—complexity found within social networking sites (p. 347).

Since Gusfield (2003), others besides Crossley (2010) have taken the stance that SI should be applied to the virtual world (Fernback, 2007; Robinson, 2007). Much of these stances are rooted in how the virtual world encourages interaction. People interact through Twitter in the same virtual place: on Twitter. When people comment, retweet, favorite, or hashtag a tweet, they are engaging in an interactive process. Robinson (2007) states that this interaction of the “online self is an extension of the offline masterself” (p. 103). Social networks are used for interaction purposes. If SI is grounded in interaction, it should be apparent that much could be learned about social networks through the views put forth by Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969).

Fernback (2007) also viewed the online community through SI. Fernback interviewed people who had experience in online groups. Fernback wanted to see how participants perceived the nature of the online social interaction. What Fernback found was that the understanding of social interaction was varied among users. Fernback goes on to say:

Their opinions about the nature of communal interaction online are rooted in meanings they construct about the value of community and from their interactions with others in their online and offline social spheres. (p. 57)

Notice how Fernback sees meanings arise: They are constructed, based on interactions, and are discussing a value (the value of the community).

Therefore, it is beneficial to take this meaning construction approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999) when studying family. One great avenue to do this through is Twitter,

not only because of its widespread use, but because it allows the researcher to search for specific items with #family. With the viewing lenses of SI and the interactional platform of Twitter, research can discover more about how family definitions are constructed.

Thus, this research will be guided by the following question: How is the family portrayed on Twitter?

Method

Text Selection

The Twitter search function was used to obtain the text selection. Twitter's search function can filter searches by "top," "all," and "people you follow." For this method, top tweets containing #family were used as the text selection.³ If a picture was included in the tweet, the picture was not analyzed. Additionally, if a tweet contained a URL, the URL was not analyzed. Thus, only words, phrases, and other hashtags were examined.

Procedure and Data Analysis

The data analysis conducted for this study used the methodology of grounded theory as its framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Grounded theory requires that an inductive approach be taken when analyzing the data; thus, the researcher(s) must analyze the data without pre-made themes (Grbich, 2007). Grbich (2007) stated that there are differences between how Glaser approached grounded theory compared to the approach taken by Strauss. While both Glaser and Strauss originally proposed grounded theory, Glaser prefers that the constant comparative method be used (Grbich, 2007). The constant comparative method incorporates open coding, where data is coded until themes emerge. During the coding process, data is constantly compared to the previously coded data to see if themes need to be adjusted, changed, or expanded. In the constant comparative method, there is only "generating and plausibly suggesting (but not provisionally testing) many categories, properties, and hypotheses about general problems"

³ According to Twitter's Chief Scientist, Abdur Chowdhury, "Top Tweets is a new algorithm we developed that finds tweets that are catching the attention of other users. . . . The algorithm looks at all kinds of interactions with tweets including retweets, favorites, and more to identify the tweets with the highest velocity beyond expectations" (McGee, 2010, para. 4).

(Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 104). The constant comparative method also only requires “saturation of data—not consideration of *all* available data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 104).

The constant comparative method was used to analyze data in this study.

Top searches for #family were collected over a span of a few weeks, amounting to a total of 1,028 tweets. In the first part of the data analysis, all the tweets were given an initial reading. Notes were taken during this initial reading process, in order to start forming potential themes. Each tweet was compared to the previous tweets to see if a new theme should be developed or changed. During this stage in the data analysis, tweets that I didn’t understand or couldn’t place under a theme were skipped. After I had read through all the tweets, I came back and reanalyzed the tweets that were skipped. The initial reading of tweets was very helpful, and initial themes began to take form. During this stage of analysis, the notes taken on the side of the tweets were kept to a minimum; I wrote down a word or two on what I thought the main idea of the tweet was. For example, I would right “Sports” next to tweets containing reference to a sports team (i.e. *My teammates voted me Captain. I just wanted to show em I was worth it*).

After these first few readings of tweets, the individual tweets were then carefully read again. This is when the constant comparative method started to take form: The tweets were read and compared against the themes that were initially established. This was done to see if new themes developed or if initial themes were solidified. As the reading and re-reading of tweets progressed, new themes were added or modified. Additional notes were taken on the side of the tweets, and questions about how to place the tweets were written down for further review (i.e. *Can tweets that use only one word be placed into a theme? or Is this just a family out bowling or is it referencing a professional bowler?*).

During this process, emergent themes were being discovered and strengthened. The notes and questions asked on the side of the tweets were re-read in order to fully assimilate the themes and to make any final changes to the established themes. After spending time re-reading the tweets and notes taken, the emergent themes were finalized. The total number of tweets analyzed was 1,028.

There are several ways this study strives to establish validity and reliability. Riessman (1993) stated that trustworthiness can be used to measure validity and reliability, suggesting that “[o]ne method of assessing the trustworthiness of the analysis is by considering its level of persuasiveness” by using examples to “showcase the link between [the researcher’s] interpretation and data” (as cited in Harrigan, 2010, p. 29). Furthermore, Glaser and Strauss (1999) argued that credibility is achieved by not only giving examples for illustration purposes, but also by carefully explaining the procedure used to code the data, both of which this study provides. Finally, Strauss and Corbin (1990) argued that the constant comparative method establishes “precision and specificity” in data analysis (p. 63).

Results

There were three main themes that emerged from the tweets analyzed: (1) Family Types, (2) Statements of Family, and (3) The Esoteric Family. Within each of these broad themes, many subthemes also emerged. These themes, along with their subthemes, will be discussed below with examples used for illustration purposes.

Family Types

From the analysis of the tweets, family was portrayed in a manner that is easily understandable. There were five subthemes that emerged: (1) Traditional, (2) Extended, (3) Adopted, (4) Step, and (5) Self-defined. These subthemes were easily understandable because of the language used in the tweets. For example, the tweets that contained step or adopted family members included the word “adopted” or “step” in the tweet (i.e. *adopted brother; stepmom*). This use of language will be explained as each subtheme is discussed. Of the subthemes, the traditional family was tweeted about the most.

The traditional family. All tweets that discussed the traditional family made reference to a mother or father figure, a son or daughter figure, or a brother or sister figure. For example, parent-child relationship was seen through the traditional family tweets:

HAPPY BIRTHDAY to the best MOM in the WORLD!!! #Family #NewYearBaby

Father and son playing out in the snow in the city. We love the view we get outside our new office location! #family

Excited to hear my dad preach this morning! And a bonus we get to hear my mom play the piano! #worship #family

As a grown man with kids I sat next to MY mom last night and watched a movie with her....it was awesome..Love your parents #family

My Dad prepared a Seafood Feast for New Year's Eve! :) yum! gstorres fattmrock #family

Addilyn Renee was born at 12:28 pm. She is 7lbs 13oz and 19.5in long. Mom and baby are doing well! #blessed #family

These tweets show how either a mother or father figure was involved in the lives of their children. Taken from the tweet alone, these tweets imply that the parent-child relationship is not an alternative form of the family (for example, it cannot be inferred that the relationship involves a step or adopted aspect by reading the tweets alone). The traditional family was also portrayed as a brother or sister relationship. For example:

Happy 1st birthday to my baby sis jah-aziah I love you so much #Family

So thankful that my brother made banana bread today! #family #Godisgood

this is my annoying brother.we got bored. had nothing to do at home.so we took selfies, well iforced him to. #family

Yesterday, my 11yo brother delivered 1.25 gallons of ice cream to my room. For my hangover, he said. #family

There were also cases where there was a mixture of the parent-child and brother or sister relationship:

Dad and my brother! #family

My mom, dad, and little sister in the back haha #family

What is interesting when discussing tweets centered around the traditional family is that there was no mention of a “wife” or “husband” or “partner.” There were mentions of what could be implied to be a husband-wife partnership (i.e. *Congratulations to Becky and Jeff Legue who became Mom and Dad today. #family*), but, even in this example, no direct mentions to “husband” or “wife” were given.

The extended family. The tweets analyzed also made mention of family members who were outside of the traditional family, and also were not specified as step or adopted family. One common subtheme of the extended family tweets included cousins:

*Fun while rock climbing with the cousin! @ProfileName #Family
#WorkingEveryMuscle*

Mary Poppins is on for the little cousins, but I think I'm enjoying it more than they are! #family

My cousin @ProfileName today at the Army All American game. Good job cuzzz, proud of you. #Family

Grandparents were another part of the family that was tweeted about. Mentions of both grandparents and great-grandparents were tweeted:

Granny's red lips will never go out of style #Fashion #Family

My grandpa is using his phone flashlight to read the menu at a high class restaurant. #family

Spending time with my Feisty 95 yo Grandma!! #soGrateful #Family

My great grandparents in England have been married 72 years to the day! #family #truelove

Great-grandfather and Great-grandson. #family

The Aunt/Uncle and Nephew/Niece were also included in the extended family tweets:

My lil nephew enjoying east coast snow fall this morning. Lil guy just can't get enough. #family #nephew

My auntie Cathy and me :) #family

Playing an intense game of bingo with my Aunt Doris. #FridayNightInDC #Family

There were also tweets that were more general in nature, but also specific enough to be viewed as part of the extended family theme. These tweets addressed family “generations,” family “reunions,” or made reference to in-laws. Often, the “in-laws” were reference indirectly, but it was fairly evident from the tweet that they were in fact in-laws involved. Below are a few examples of these type of tweets:

Four boys.. Three generations.. #family

Ready 2 reunite at da Evalle Family Reunion! #family #whygreendoe

Broke break with my brother @ProfileName and his wonderful family. Blessed to know such great people! #family

Come on #cowboys!!!! I believe! Tons of #family in town for Texas game tomorrow and we are rooting...

As with the traditional family subtheme, the extended family subtheme was fairly easy to identify. There were key words or phrases in the tweets that alluded to a specific lens of family. The traditional family and extended family were the most common subtheme in the traditional family. The following two subthemes (adopted and step) were more rare, but still prevalent enough to include them as part of the Standard Categorization theme.

The adopted family. The adopted family was evident in the language of “adopted”:

Best view I could ask for... Adopted family night with the Parkinsons #family

My (adopted) brother looks jus like u and reminds me of u so much y'all gon be bff's #family @ProfileName

The stepfamily. As with the adopted family, the stepfamily was revealed in tweets by the language of “step” used:

Wish we could've gotten my stepmom in the picture.. My big, dysfunctional family #christmas #family

Upstaged by my stepsister's face, yet again #Family #Christmas

There is one thing that should be mentioned in the Standard Categorization theme: Many tweets were esoteric (a theme that will be discussed later in this paper) in nature, and these tweets could have represented other types of family not represented in the Standard Categorization theme (for example, an interracial family). Therefore, these subthemes were the only easily understood categorizations of family that emerged from the tweets analyzed.

Self-defined family. The third theme that emerged from the tweets was how people were associating family with an ideal. Family was defined based up an *association*, and not just a “standard” or “common” framework. This theme was very diverse, with people associating family with many different ideals. There were two main ideals that will be discussed first: Sports and Friends.

Sports. Family was associated with a sports team, where the sports team was portrayed as the family. One thing that is evident in these tweets was language that utilized first-person pronouns, such as “I” and “We.” This is interesting, since the association of family seems to be getting more abstract, yet at the same time more personal:

*My teammates voted me as a Captain. I just wanted to show em I was worth it.
#Family #ChiefsKingdom*

Dedicated to the seniors, y’all changed the face of Clemson football to what it is today! I love you all! Thank you for everything. #family

*4 wins was the goal this weekend, and we got 4 wins!! #Family #MBB
@ProfileName*

I’m so glad that I got to spend my weekend with my team!! #lovethem #family

Great win and very proud of our team. I love the togetherness! #family

In addition to the personal-pronoun language, tweets about sports mentioned the family as the cohesiveness or strength that kept the team together:

One big family!!! That what it takes to come back in the last inning down by 5 runs and win it with a walkoff!! #family @ProfileName

Difficult year, YES but the NY GIANTS will bounce back stronger than ever IN '14. #IFANBASE #FAMILY #ITEAM

Love these kids! Win or lose, I’m always proud of them. #Family

Friends. Tweets also equated friends with family. In these tweets, the family was not directly defined as family; instead, a statement about friends was made, and the family was associated in this friendship:

You could say we're best friends but that would be an understatement #family #bestfriend

Be grateful and appreciative of your true #friends as they will always keep it in context #family

Nothing better than to spend time with long time friends! #family #SavingMrBanks

A few true friends will always be better than a bunch of fake ones. #family #iloveyouassholes

Tweets associating family with friends could further be broken down into tweets that talked about “the boys” and “the girls”:

With the Boys #Family @ProfileName1 @ProfileName2 @ProfileName3 @ProfileName4 #BenRoberts

Soft Sunday goes out to the boys, only ones who actually like me #family

Great time hanging out with the girls today. We crushed Chuck E's. Going to miss them next month! #Family

Can't believe the season went by do fast! Love these ladies like #family! @ProfileName

Other associations. While sports and friends constituted most of the tweets involving the self-defined family, there were many other associations that were found in the analysis. The list below shows how users of Twitter associated family with many other ideals:

School: *Sojourn getting attacked by Abby hahah TRULY GOING TO MISS ALL THE SENIORS #Family*

*I came to Syracuse a boy and left a MAN #FAMILY #CUSE
Gone miss the seniors for sure #Family*

- Loved Ones: *Some times the most beautiful thing is breathing another day with loved ones. #family #friends*
- Always gotta look out for your loved ones no matter how hard the situation is #Family*
- Vacation: *Cree checking out broccoli from the garden..#family #vacation*
Still enjoying my vacations #family #copandaro
- Fans: *When we all helped each other meet him on tour. #Family*
#2013beliebermemories
- Congrats to @ProfileName for hitting 1 Million followers on @vineapp. Just another way for the rest of the world to see your talent :) #family*
- Celebrations: *Happy Feast of the Holy #Family! Have you seen our depiction of the “Bolivian Holy Family” yet?*
- #tbt just a lil bit to the BEST New Years party ever with these amazing people who are changing the world #Family*
- Church: *I <3 My Church! Celebrating 2013 and anticipating 2014! Loving all the hugs and catching up with volunteers! A great first day back! #family*
- TV shows: *I feel a special bond with people who watch one tree hill idk #family*
- Fitness: *Put on a few extra pounds over Christmas? Actif Fitness is the place for you! £1 a day #family*
- Coworkers: *working at @ProfileName was probably one of the best things I could’ve done. love my coworkers. #family*

Each of these associations illustrates how the family was being portrayed as an ideal association. This is also not to say that other associations of the family do not exist on Twitter. The additional associations used are to demonstrate that users of Twitter associated the family with a wide variety of ideals, and this shows the complexity and depth that the definition of family on Twitter tweets. The Esoteric Family, the third main theme, further demonstrates the wide range of frameworks that family can take on.

Statements of Family

Instead of all tweets associating with a specific family type, tweets also made direct statements on what the family is and the characteristics of the family. In these tweets, a lot of meaning being created on Twitter is seen, as users are defining family as they see it. Of all the tweets analyzed, these tweets are straightforward, attempting to answer the over-arching question of this project: What is family?

What family is. This first subtheme deals with direct definition of family. As evident from the tweets that will be shared, these tweets often included statements such as “*family is...*” Users of Twitter were shaping the definition of family through these tweets:

#Family is What Matters Most @ProfileName1 @ProfileName2 #KerryLee’s Countdown to #2014

@ProfileName1 @ProfileName2 really cute bub! Flattered he is named after me. Congrats on the new addition to the family. #family=everything

“In every conceivable manner, the #family is link to the past, bridge to our future.” Alex Haley

It doesn’t matter what year it is...#Family is forever. #love you both so much @ProfileName1 & ProfileName2

In these definitions of family, the family is defined in a more broad and general sense. Defining the family in a broad manner was consistent throughout the Statements of Family theme. There were, however, tweets that began to define the family in a slightly more specific manner. In the following examples, users of Twitter defined who could be included in the family:

“Friends are the #family you choose.” (Jess C. Scott)

You ain’t gotta be blood to be #Family

This is one of the first times that we see the family beginning to be defined outside of the “normal” or “standard” definitions of family. The family, in these instances, includes

connections to friends and non-blood members. This expansion of the family will continue to become more evident in each of the following main themes. Before this, there is one more subtheme in Statements of Family that should be discussed.

Characteristics of family. One of the main characteristics of the family evident in the tweets analyzed was the order in which family should appear. For example, family was often defined as the most important thing in the universe:

#family #first

There is nothing more important and better than #family

Chillin like a villan #family over errrrthing

There were a few exceptions to defining family as ultimate importance (i.e. *My New Years resolution! #God1st #Family next*), but overall the family was portrayed in tweets as most important. In addition to the gravity of family, there were also tweets that focused on specific characteristics that a “strong” or “happy” family should strive for:

This weekend, focus on Loved Ones and Community. Strong families have lower rates of depression, suicide, and stress. #happiness #family

“May I; thank you; I’m sorry” : Key phrases for the #family, says #PopeFrancis

What’s more important than the #health of your #family? @ProfileName

While there is no “template” as to what makes a happy #family, there are particular traits that can be spotted

In these tweets, the family is portrayed to have good, achievable traits. Family is no longer just “forever” or “over errrrthing,” but can be strong, healthy, and happy. Overall, tweets made statements about the family, defining it not only as something that *is*, but also as something that *behaves* in a certain manner. In the following themes, specific definitions of the family will be lost; instead, the family will be generally defined.

The Esoteric Family

There were many tweets that, when examined based upon understanding better the social construction of family, contained language and phrases that could not simply be identified as a family type or a statement of the family. These tweets were much too general in nature, and reading the tweets alone was not enough to identify what was meant by the term “family.” Thus, it was evident that some tweets were esoteric in nature. Within these enigmatic tweets, two subthemes arose: Family in General and Contained Family.

Family in general. This subtheme emerged when it was realized that tweets were making reference to the family, but what “family” exactly meant was too general to further categorize under the other three main themes. These tweets used language that was less specific, and therefore harder to identify. The construction of family was being narrowed to the users of Twitter and their followers, and masked from the current research:

Thankful for another DAY! Much needed quality TIME with my #FAMILY

I made some great memories this year with this #FAMILY

*Some of us need to take a step back and realize how blessed we are.
#countyourblessing #family*

*When we pull into Tim Hortons just to do a search for the closet Starbucks.
#family*

Always wishing I had more time with this bunch. #family.

In each of these examples, the family could take on any definition. These tweets require more understanding to know what “*this bunch*” means. Therefore, they were categorized as esoteric. There were, however, tweets that were even more esoteric in nature, and emerged as another subtheme.

Contained family. This subtheme is called “contained” because the tweets that fell under this subtheme would not be understood unless you had very specific inside knowledge of the Twitter user. These tweets were the most general in nature to an outside observer. Although each tweet in this subtheme might have made sense to the Twitter user and his’ or hers’ followers, the researcher did not understand each tweet. A few extra examples are included below to support this subtheme:

Ricordando!! #family #loveforever

Hi there @ProfileName1, have you seen @ProfileName2’s feature on @ProfileName3 & her fascinating #family background?

Primos together @ProfileName #family #happy

#tbt #nikita #family @ProfileName1 @ProfileName2 miss you both!!!

Benjii taleuur :) haaahaaaaaaaa #Family

Chillin’ with the Brits. #family

In my hood “Overbaakens” with mihlaly & Avuyile oFF to playland KingsBeach #family vibes

Adriano and Molly! My fav! Growing up so fast! #family #blessed

These tweets could not be understood unless known by specific people. The family was still being used in the hashtag, but the hashtag of family had less functionality since the tweet is only understood by a unique set of individuals.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to see, through a raw collection of data, how the family is currently being portrayed on social networking sites. This raw collection of data was achieved by viewing communication taking place in the authentic context of the social networking site, Twitter. There are several implications that can be made from the themes that emerged from this study. First, it is important to note some general observations of the themes, and how these observations further connect to the construction of family. Second, there is an aspect of *family fantasy* that will be examined, and this will lead into a discussion on how this study enhances SI theory. The third implication is that people, with the help of technology, are now taking an observable role in defining family. Finally, the themes of this study posit many interesting questions on how the layperson currently defines family.

One of the most basic observations from this study was that the family was portrayed in a positive manner. There were very few times when tweets portrayed the family as something that was negative or unhealthy. Even amidst the diversity present in these tweets on how the family was defined, family was still seen as a good identity. Thus, this study adds weight the argument put forth by Scanzoni (2004): “[H]ousehold diversity might be [becoming] more desirable than household uniformity” (p. 13). In the tweets collected, the family was portrayed as very diverse. Yet within these tweets, the family was also portrayed as desirable. The notion that the family can be connected to a sports organization, friends, or an adopted sister shows how diverse the family was in the data analyzed. The diversity of the tweets (and of the emergent themes), coupled with the positivity of the tweets, suggests that people are defining—in a desirable manner—the family different from the traditional family form.

The thematic analysis also revealed that tweets could be placed into multiple subthemes. For example, some tweets discussed aspects of the traditional family, while also including self-defined definitions of family (such as associating family with a sports team). The fact that some of the tweets could be placed into multiple subthemes is important for two reasons. First, this mixture of subthemes continues to illustrate the complexity of the family (Widmer et al., 2013). Floyd, Mikkelson, and Judd (2006) stated that scholarly definitions of family are either more inclusive or more exclusive, “depending on the social and political interests” (p. 25) of the researchers. The tweets that mixed multiple themes, however, are inclusive of multiple family definitions; the layperson, then, portrays the family as more inclusive than exclusive. Even the tweets that described the family in a narrower sense, such as the traditional family, were not necessarily exclusive since these tweets didn’t state what family *was not*. Instead, tweets about the family were, holistically, inclusive of multiple family definitions.

Secondly, tweets that could be placed into multiple subthemes show how the layperson can mix multiple family definitions to shape a specific, and individualized, definition. Not all of the tweets conform to specific themes, and this means the layperson’s definition of family does not always conform to specific ideals. The tweets that included multiple subthemes demonstrate that the boundaries of family still remain unclear (Widmer et al., 2013), since the layperson can arrange these subthemes in different combinations. This study demonstrates how most tweets can be grouped into nice, definable themes; tweets that mix subthemes, however, mix family definitions, making the portrayal of the family on Twitter all the more complex.

This leads to the *family fantasy* aspect of tweets. Users on Twitter associated the family with many different things, fantasizing that their family could include anything from their church to the school they attended. Fantasizing happened the most in the *sports* subtheme, where people

would state that their team was their family. This ties in nicely with symbolic convergence theory, and the definition of fantasy:

[*F*]antasy within [symbolic convergence theory] is the way that communities of people create their social reality, and employs a meaning much closer to another common usage of the term: the imaginative and creative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need. . . . A fantasy theme is a way for people to present or show to the group mind, to make visible (understandable) a common experience and shape it into social knowledge. (Bormann, 1982, p. 52)

Twitter becomes a place for these people to make visible how they *fantasize* family. Consider the example of the person who included viewers of the show *One Tree Hill* as family (*I feel a special bond with people who watch one tree hill idk #family*). According to IMDB's trivia on the show, in season 5, there were 2.91 million viewers. Tweeting about *One Tree Hill* makes *visible* this person's fantasy of family, and shapes this person's "common experience" into "social knowledge." "Beliebers" are another example of this fantasized family. For example, one tweet in the data analyzed stated the following: *& now he has 48million #beliebers #family*. In the *future research* section, I argue that Symbolic Convergence Theory should continue to examine family fantasies on social networking sites.

Though the medium of Twitter and the hashtag, authentic interactions between people are clearly seen. Interactions are central to SI theory, since meaning is constructed based on our interactions with others. SI theory proposed that meanings *grow* from interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). When setting out to do this study, I thought that I would see this growth in meaning when examining tweets. I found, however, that growth in meaning was not evident in the data analyzed. In other words, tweets only offered a snapshot view of family; it was not

possible (within the guidelines of this study) to see how certain definitions of family had, over time, progressed on Twitter. Having a lack of growth in meaning could be because of the nature of the method used to analyzing tweets. This study did not incorporate a longitudinal study, which might offer more insights into how meanings of family grow on Twitter. With that said, however, there are still several reasons why this study enhances the current understanding of SI theory.

First, while *growth* was not evident in the tweets analyzed, *defining* family was prevalent. Recall that SI theory argues that interactions with others define things. By simply observing tweets on Twitter, I was able to directly see what meaning was being attached to the family. Essentially, this is SI theory in action, where users of Twitter are using the hashtag to create and confirm definitions of family. Additionally, in 1949, Murdock defined the nuclear family. Not surprisingly, over 60 years later, tweets still confirm that people define family in the traditional sense. The tweets, however, also show how other portrayals of family are being used today, including how people are constructing the meaning of the fanaticized family. Since Twitter is such an interactional platform, according to SI theory, people are creating and assigning meaning to the term family based upon these interactions. As these interactions continue on Twitter, these meanings of the definition of family will continue to be created. Therefore, it can be argued that the interactional nature of Twitter will continue to contribute to the meanings and definitions society holds on the term *family*.

Second, this study contributes to SI theory because of the theme *The Esoteric Family*. In this theme, meanings of the family are *only* known by a select few individuals, since many of these tweets tagged people; unless you knew who was being tagged in the tweet, it was impossible to know what meaning #family contained. Therefore, while the meaning of family in

these tweets was not clear to me, this does not mean it was not clear to the person who tweeted. Furthermore, it also doesn't mean that the meaning of family was not clear to the followers of this person's profile page. Assigning meaning to family, then, was still happening, at least to a select few. This relates to the argument put forth by Crossley (2010): Every person has several relationships with others, and these others have other relationships with other people, and so forth. While a tweet might only be directly impacting a select few (every person has relationships with others), these select few still have relationships with yet others, and therefore will share meaning with them. Crossley stated that others interact with others, and therefore I argue that the meaning of family in the esoteric tweet is not contained to just a select few.

Third, this study contributes to SI because it examines how the *self* arises through interactions. Much of the tweets were self-defined, which illustrates how individuals are portraying family on Twitter. The self-defined tweets reveal how interactions form "the framework of the self" (Mead, 1934, p. 163). A tweet that is self-defined means that, to that individual user of Twitter, the term family has become known to take on certain characteristics. The concept of the self is central to the theory of SI; self-defined tweets show how interactions with others form a unique self-concept, based upon our experience with others. For example, I have never played on a football team, so my self-concept of family would never include a football team; however, some people's self-concept of family includes their football team (i.e. *#PeopleWhoMadeMy2013 my boys for making this the best football season ever #family*). Through examining individual tweets, especially those of the self-defined type, it is evident that people have formed their self based upon interactions with others.

Another implication of this study relates to how technology is impacting how family is being constructed. Wahl, McBride, & Schrodt (2005) stated that "[c]hanging technologies and

advancements have influenced the way families interact and relate,” arguing that “this new medium can potentially change what it means to be a family” (pp. 290 – 291). Wahl et al. stated that technology potentially obscures the “reality” of the family (p. 291), since the dystopia of the family cannot exist online. In other words, technology portrays the family as a utopia, where only positive characteristics are espoused. Additionally, with the use of technology, all types of people are beginning to interact with one another, including wide age ranges, ethnic backgrounds, sexual identities, and religious backgrounds. With the Internet reaching many places around the world, definitions of family have the potential to be influenced by nearly everyone. This means that there are no limits on who defines or shapes family. It would be expected, then, that portrayals of family continue to become shaped by interactions as technology becomes more easily accessed; the construction of family is becoming subjected to the rise of technology.

Additionally, if “Twitter is the microphone for the masses” (Murthy, 2011, p. 779), then the implications of technology means something even more for Twitter users. Citizens, according to Murthy, are becoming journalists with the help of Twitter. The construction of family will continue to be defined by scholars such as Murdock (1949), Uddin (2008), and so forth, but also by users of social networking sites such as Twitter. Therefore, Twitter is becoming a platform for all voices to be heard and reckoned with.

The voice of Twitter brings up another implication: People, with the aid of technology, are now taking an *observable* role in shaping the construction of family. Obviously, before technology such as Twitter, people still interacted and shared meaning with one another. With social networking sites such as Twitter, however, people can constantly (and virtually) share meaning with one another. Hundred of tweets are being posted on Twitter each hour that contain

the hashtag #family, showing how easy it is to observe the construction of family. In other words, technology gives a platform for people to *showcase* what they consider to be family. Previously, to study the construction of family, research studies would have to conduct interviews or pass out surveys. With technology, however, the construction of family can be observed first-hand.

Marshall McLuhan (1965) famously argued that the “medium is the message.” To McLuhan, the medium (such as the radio, TV, and now the Internet), and not the message (the actual messages presented by radio and TV), deserves more attention since it has more potential impact. The medium of Twitter is very unique from anything that society has seen in recent years. Not only can all people participate in this medium, but also the medium is structured in such a manner that the content in it is limited to 140 characters or less. Thus, the medium of Twitter must be another implication of this study. The actual content, such as people defining and constructing family, needs to be in balance with the medium used to employ such construction. While the content of the tweets in this study didn’t offer any radically alternating definitions of the family, the *medium* of Twitter could. I bring up McLuhan to demonstrate that both the content and the medium deserve attention, and both of these need to be taken into consideration to fully understand the implications of this study.

Finally, there are several aspects that can be discussed about how the layperson is now defining family. Tweets on twitter that contain #family are very inclusive of many different representations of the family. This means that the family is becoming less structured. Instead, definitions of family are becoming more individualistic, making the term, “The Family,” adaptive. The family, which has predominantly been contained to the traditional and extended definitions, is becoming broader and more individualistic.

Since family definitions are becoming broader and more inclusive, the family might be beginning to be understood in only an esoteric manner. In other words, what is meant by the term “family” will be limited in influence to the social circle in which one finds him or herself. Since the layperson is beginning to understand family in an esoteric manner, this will have effect on scholars’ definitions of family. Floyd et al. (2006) argued that scholarly definitions of family are important for three reasons. First, scholarly definitions help researchers understand who they should observe in family studies. Second, scholarly definitions inform “clinical practice” (p. 22). Third, scholarly definitions “inform policy and intervention,” and define “*what society learns about family*” (p. 23). The laypersons’ definitions, with the help of technology, are now being more visible; scholarly definitions will now have to include the laypersons’ definitions, even when they are esoteric.

Limitations

When analyzing the tweets, some of the terms within the *traditional* and *extended* tweets were hard to fully understand. For example, the tweets that contained reference to “dad” or “mom” could be referring to stepparents, adopted parents, etc; it was assumed that these type of tweets referred to birth parents. Tweets that referenced “sister” and “brother” also could take on multiple meanings. Thus, while trying to define the family, other issues of defining terms became a factor. The examples provided in this study should allow the readers to verify the persuasiveness of each example, and why it was included under each theme and subtheme.

Another limitation was that the text in the tweet was the only part of the tweet analyzed. Thus, links to videos, photos, or blog posts that were included in tweets were not analyzed. Videos, photos, and blog posts might reveal another aspect of the construction of family that is not revealed through this study. This study, however, sought to understand the construction of family within the medium of Twitter; external sources such as Instagram photos or YouTube videos would complicate this process. Furthermore, this study wished to examine how the layperson defined and constructed family, not how their favorite blogger did.

While this study sought to understand how the layperson defined family, I also understand that celebrities were most likely mixed into the data analyzed. This is a limitation, since profiles were not examined. From the amount of tweets analyzed, and the method used to select them, I argue that the layperson was represented. That does not mean other people besides the layperson also infiltrated the tweets analyzed.

Finally, “private” profiles on Twitter were not represented. While profiles on Twitter are defaulted to be “public,” action can be taken by the user to limit the reach and accessibility of their tweets. Originally, it was thought that *every* tweet that contained a hashtag was

instantaneously public; however, it was later learned that private tweets were not searchable, regardless of if a hashtag was used in the tweet.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should continue to examine the family through social networking sites. Instead of showing how the family simply *uses* social networking sites, future research should demonstrate how the family is *represented and portrayed* on social networking sites. Social networking sites offer an easy way for researchers to see communication taking place between its members. Social networking sites will allow family communication scholars to see how the layperson is constructing the family. Other social networking sites should be examined, including Facebook and Instagram.

Twitter should also be a focus of future studies. Future communication scholars could address some of the limitations of this current study. These scholars could examine the profiles on Twitter, and they could also examine external sources attached to tweets, such as videos, photos, and blog posts. This will help to continually inform research on how the family is constructed and defined by society. Additionally, Twitter allows researchers to do longitudinal studies on the construction of family. Even now, Twitter has been in existence for nearly 10 years. Future studies could examine the hashtag #family over these past years in order to show how portrayals of the family have changed or remained the same.

Family communication scholars should also continue to examine the differences between scholarly definitions and laypersons' definitions. Today, the Internet offers a way for a variety of voices to be heard. Future communication scholars should continue to give attention to these voices. The differences between scholarly definitions and laypersons' definitions will have implications; future research should understand and be able to explain these implications.

Additionally, research should further investigate how people are fantasizing family. Symbolic Convergence Theory can inform this research, providing a better understanding of

these fantasies. A near replication of this study could be done with Symbolic Convergence Theory as the theoretical grounding, instead of SI theory. Also, I image that a mixed methodology might be beneficial when using Symbolic Convergence Theory. Interactions between people online could be observed to see how these people fantasize family; these people could then be interviewed or asked to complete a survey. This way, the comparison between the online self and the offline self will become apparent.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated how the construction of family is made visible through the medium of Twitter. Constructions of family definitions are influenced by the interactions between people on Twitter, and these interactions are observable. While the family was portrayed on Twitter in the traditional sense, there were also tweets in which people self-defined or fanaticized family members. Tweets also demonstrated how esoteric portrayals of family are becoming, and how society is learning about the family through the layperson because of social networking sites. It is now imperative that future communication research continues to observe the portrayals of family given by laypeople on social networking sites, as this will influence scholarly definitions of family for years to come.

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