

DIGITAL WHITENESS IMPERIALISM:
REDEFINING CAUCASIAN IDENTITY POST-BOSTON BOMBING

Benjamin Brojakowski

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2017

Committee:

Lara Martin Lengel, Advisor

Monica A. Longmore
Graduate Faculty Representative

Lisa Hanasono

Syed Shahin

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ABSTRACT

Lara Martin Lengel, Advisor

Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's trial was one of the most important news stories of 2015 and inspired a massive social media response. Many people utilized social media to share messages of hope, but others created hateful messages and threats. Furthermore, social media has become an important source of news gathering and social support. The attack, the social media response, and the nature of social media combine to raise questions about the ways social media users present themselves, especially in times of stress/conflict. It is also important to consider who creates these networks, why individuals feel more comfortable to behave differently in them, and why some individuals have restricted access to these spaces.

This dissertation draws from critical intercultural communication, computer-mediated communication (CMC), history, sociology, and architecture to introduce Digital Whiteness Imperialism. The study identifies the critical intercultural communication concepts of Whiteness, Identity, and Privilege and explicates the ways these concepts have translated to digital spaces such as Twitter. The dissertation also draws comparisons to physical space and proxemics. I examine social media as space at micro, meso, and macro levels. With this information I focus on how Twitter users utilize that program to advance or challenge Digital Whiteness Imperialism.

The study includes an argument for using critical qualitative methods for studying Digital Whiteness Imperialism specifically as it relates to the Twitter response to Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's trial. I use tweets to examine the factors that lead individuals to create and publish negative social media messages as well as examining the impression management strategies

they use when posting these messages or responding when their message is challenged. In sum, 26,710 tweets with over 581 million impressions were collected. This dataset was later reduced to English language tweets during the most active period of the #BostonBombing trend. More than 13,000 tweets were analyzed and several themes emerged that reflect larger themes of death and punishment toward individuals that are Otherized by the dominant White male culture, a unique set of conspiracy beliefs from users that are Otherized for their ideas, subversive content that hijacks the hashtag, conflicting opinions of the #BostonStrong meaning, and more.

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, friends, faculty, and supporters.

Thank you all for your time and support.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am eternally grateful to everyone that has helped and supported me during my time at Bowling Green State University.

I want to first acknowledge my family and friends who have been endlessly supportive of me and encouraged me to pursue this education even when I was unable to show the same support in return.

I am also thankful for my committee for their guidance and support. I want to specifically thank Dr. Lara Lengel and Dr. Lisa Hanasono for their assistance and guidance with this dissertation since I began working on it in 2015. I also want to thank Dr. Saif Shahin and Dr. Monica Longmore who joined the committee at later dates and have provided excellent advice and support. I would also like to thank everyone for their patience, kindness, and positive energy during every meeting, conversation, and defense.

I also want to express my thanks to the Bowling Green State University Graduate College for giving me the opportunity to work with students and scholars from a variety of academic backgrounds and disciplines.

I am inspired by each of you to show the same kindness and support to the people in my life that you have shown to me.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The annual Boston Marathon has been a notable event in the United States since it was established in 1897 (Boston Athletic Association, 2016). The Boston Marathon was the sixth largest marathon in the world in 2014 with nearly 32,000 finishers (Wood, 2015). Roughly 500,000 fans attend the marathon to support athletes from all over the world that participate in the event (Kiernan, 2016), the beloved Boston Red Sox play an early home game to accommodate and celebrate the runners (Morgan, 2016), and the event generates millions of dollars for the local economy (Hu, Knox, and Kapucu, 2014). Unfortunately, the joy of the marathon was overshadowed by two bombings on April 15, 2013 that killed three people and injured 264 others (Konowinski, Singh, & Soto, 2016). This attack led to a citywide manhunt that resulted in several more injuries and deaths before one of the alleged attackers, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, was killed and the other, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, was captured by Boston police on April 19, 2013 (Botelho, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, this attack inspired millions of social media posts (Haddow & Haddow, 2015). Many of these comments ignored the positive actions of the individuals who donated time and resources to the recovery efforts, provided news updates, and campaigned for additional help during this time. Instead, many of these comments were accusatory, bigoted, threatening, and filled with hate speech toward various racial, ethnic, and religious groups. In previous research, I discovered that people who tweeted these hateful comments showed little remorse for their messages and many even portrayed themselves as victims, labeled themselves as “patriots,” and announced they were proud of their hate when they were confronted about the content of their messages (Brojakowski, 2016). These types of posts raise numerous questions about the ways social media users utilize impression management

strategies online. These messages challenge the socially favorable attitudes of inclusivity and cultural open-mindedness, but they are also a part of a larger phenomenon that allows hate speech to exist and thrive online. As will be explained later in this dissertation, there is a growing belief that social media users are utilizing Twitter as echo chambers of information that supports their beliefs and creates incivility. Furthermore, some scholars are interested in examining emotional contagion, or the phenomenon of “catching” the common emotion of people in the social network (Coviello et al., 2014), in these networks and recognize that message characteristics tweeted by the current President of the United States may contribute to growing anger on Twitter and less productive dialogue (Ott, 2017). This creates unique questions for digital impression management researchers.

This study aims to build on the current literature of digital impression management, specifically during times of intercultural terror/ism or conflict. Most simply, digital impression management can be defined as creating and maintaining an ideal selves or profiles in virtual social networks. Recent media coverage of events such as the April 2015 Baltimore riots that were caused by the killing of unarmed Black citizens (Zohny, 2015), the Confederate flag debate (Sobel Fitts, 2015), and police violence toward people of color (Araiza, Sturm, Istek, & Bock, 2016) have followed a similar pattern of the Boston Marathon attacks. In these situations, social media becomes a primary news gathering source, specific terms trend, and research indicates that individuals most often interact with people who share similar opinions (O’Connell, 2016). These events have also brought terms such as ‘Whiteness,’ ‘privilege,’ and ‘identity’ out of academic journals and thrust them into public discourse and the Twitterverse. The emergence of these concepts has inspired new debates regarding issues such as race, gender, and ethnicity, but these same debates have been fit into short news segments (Edwards,

2015), blogs (Bradley, 2015), and social media trends (#BlackLivesMatter). It is important to recognize that public awareness of these concepts can create a valuable dialogue, but the current presentation of these ideas in abbreviated formats¹ often leads to more divisive attitudes toward individuals with opposing opinions and ideologies (Hughey, 2010).

The media coverage and social media interactions during the events described on the first pages of this dissertation are part of a much larger issue related to Whiteness in contemporary America. Whiteness includes the structure of racial identity, a racial social hierarchy, and racial privilege. Chapter two focuses on these concepts and applies them to digital culture as well. Online spaces are often owned, designed, and policed by White males. The lack of employment opportunities in technology industry and the early adoption patterns in technology use has led to a type of imperialism that favors the White male perspective (Brock, 2012) and creates stereotypes about the ways women and people of color use technology (Quail, 2011). This standpoint has also contributed to the way popular social media spaces like Twitter and Facebook have been designed and contribute to the schism that currently exists between users on those sites. For example, researchers such as Ott (2017), Carpenter (2010), Yun and Park (2011), and others found that social media users frequently follow and interact with likeminded others. This interaction discourages the acceptance of other perspectives and benefits individuals in a place of power or fame that have a large audience on their social media platforms. Therefore, further explication of these concepts, and more specifically, the way they exist online, is needed.

¹ Examples of these formats include digital spaces where words and characters are limited such as microblogs, comment sections, and social media statuses or captions.

Digital Whiteness Imperialism

In this study, I introduce and develop the theory of Digital Whiteness Imperialism. This theory argues that social media profiles mirror many of the same factors prominent in definitions and descriptions of imperialism. It also contends that social media profiles exist simultaneously as both extensions of selves and microstructures in part of a larger network. I tie this concept to the Boston Marathon Bombing by asserting that the tragic event in April 2013 was a critical incident that serves as a useful example of this theory. More specifically, this study will examine this concept through a critical interpretive thematic analysis of tweets related to the Boston Marathon bombing and subsequent trials of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

Later in this introduction, I explain my personal and academic interests in this topic as well as my goals in contributing to the current literature of digital impression management and computer-mediated communication (CMC). First, I introduce the research questions that guide my inquiry into this topic.

Research Questions

It is vital to introduce the research questions that will guide this dissertation. These questions provide a valuable guide through this research and impact the data collection and methods described later in this study. The questions are:

RQ1: In what ways do Twitter users utilize various message creation tactics to advance Digital Whiteness Imperialism?

RQ1a: How do media organizations utilize Twitter to maintain or advance Digital Whiteness Imperialism?

RQ1b: How do media personalities utilize Twitter to maintain or advance Digital Whiteness Imperialism?

RQ1c: How do individuals utilize Twitter to maintain or advance Digital Whiteness Imperialism?

RQ1d: How do individuals utilize Twitter to resist the status quo of the Twitter environment?

RQ2: How do users utilize Twitter to create harmful content from their personal accounts?

RQ2a: How do users challenge harmful content?

RQ3: How do users utilize Twitter to create empathetic content from their personal accounts?

RQ3a: How do users utilize Twitter to create diverse content from their personal accounts?

Researcher Self-Reflexivity

My interest in online impression management emerged more than a decade ago when Myspace became a popular networking tool for my friends and myself. At the time, I did not understand the theoretical concepts that guided my interest, but I clearly recognized the ways these profiles had offline consequences, such as school rumors and challenges in interpersonal relationships. Years later, I finally explored these concepts from an academic perspective for my Masters' thesis. In the thesis, I examined the ways people viewed Facebook, Twitter, and dating profiles. I discovered that individuals felt a strong personal connection to their own profiles and the profiles of others. Additionally, I learned that these individuals assumed others had the same feelings toward their profiles and believed that it was common to embellish details to create an ideal self online. In this work, I discovered that some individuals created ideal selves subconsciously while others did it consciously to "level the playing field." These social media

users often assumed others were dishonest or manipulative in their profiles and created ideal selves to compete for the same social benefits.

This interest expanded during a tragic time near my hometown in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Sadly, several middle school and junior high school students who battled depression took their own lives because of bullying that occurred within digital networks. I could not understand why individuals who had the opportunity to develop moral, confident personas online would choose to be abusive instead. As my doctoral studies progressed and social networks grew in popularity, I found that spreading hateful messages online was a common tool for members of different hate groups. Many of these deplorable messages were reframed and spread by hate groups in instances of information laundering by concealing or reframing information or statistics (Klein, 2012), used by anonymous jokers known as trolls (Phillips, 2015), and reinforced by peoples' willful ignorance to avoid information that does not match their opinion (Himmelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013).

Later in my doctoral studies program, I discovered that women and people of color were the most common target of this digital abuse. This observation was supported by several researchers such as Hunt (2016), Roese (2014), Lindsay, Booth, Messing, and Taller (2015), and others. I also discovered the Twitter account @YesYoureRacist, which works to shame and educate individuals who preface stereotypical and prejudiced statements with the disclaimer "I'm not racist but..." After a brief Twitter and email interaction with the owner of this account in 2014, I learned that the Boston Marathon Bombing eclipsed the 2012 election of Barack Obama and the 2013 election of the first non-European Pope (Francis) as his busiest time in finding hate speech online. As a frequent visitor of Boston and a marathon runner, I was immediately drawn to this topic and conducted my own study of the @YesYoureRacist Twitter account during this

time. In my study of users' online impression management tactics, I discovered that individuals often deleted their comments when confronted by @YesYoureRacist, but others were proud of their hate speech or chose to reframe their roles as victims or American "patriots" during these confrontations. After this initial study (Brojakowski, 2016), my interest in this topic grew and led to this dissertation topic.

Chapter Organization

Chapter two of this dissertation is divided into three sections: (1) theoretical perspectives; (2) intercultural communication; and (3) social media and space. This chapter begins with definitions of terrorism/terrorist, social media, social media profiles, and imperialism. These terms are vital to the current research and it is important to address these terms before investigating these concepts from a critical interpretive standpoint. The chapter then shifts to focus on impression management theory, describing the theoretical grounding in impression management strategies and the evolution of this theory beginning with Goffman's (1956) initial description of impression management. This transitions into a description of the theory's sociological roots before acknowledging its evolution into a corporate business strategy. The chapter then provides contemporary details of this theory and how it has been used in CMC research. This portion of the chapter concludes with a description and brief history of the theory of cognitive dissonance. The first section of chapter two ends with an examination of the conflict between individuals' desire to use impression management strategies to maintain cognitive harmony and the realization that their online personas are frequently much different from their offline selves.

The second section of chapter two focuses on the concepts of identity, privilege, and Whiteness. These concepts are vital to creating a full understanding of impression management.

The examination of these concepts begins by comparing popular media descriptions of these terms with critical and interpretive research. These current media and social media responses are important to include because of their significance to my research on social media as well as referencing their current space in the American consciousness. The chapter also explicates the ways Whiteness relates to privilege and identity construction in various spaces of American culture. To achieve this goal, the chapter draws from history, critical intercultural communication, media studies, and gender studies. Research literature from other academic disciplines related to privilege and identity is also presented to show the way social, political, and economic power have been established in a context of Whiteness.

The final portion of chapter two examines micro-level, meso-level, and macro-level spaces. I make a case for social media profiles as micro spaces that are owned by registered social media users. This section of the research uses theories and concepts of architecture to examine the design of these structures as owned territories furnished by identity characteristics. These micro spaces are then connected to larger social media networks. This requires an investigation of the ways users populate these networks, interact with users inside these spaces, and explore the ways Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect contributes to negative communication online. These spaces are then analyzed in terms of meso-level structures. The chapter draws upon neighborhood satisfaction sociological research and concepts from digital mapping to develop an in-depth understanding of social media as physical space. Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect is used again to examine the ways internet users contribute to negative communication online and the reasons it is so common and accepted in these spaces. This chapter concludes with a description of macro-level spaces, which situates a user's profile and immediate network in a much larger digital society. Throughout these descriptions, I incorporate

research of impression management theory and descriptions of disparaging communication behaviors.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology for this dissertation. It begins with a description of Denzin's (2010) critical interpretive paradigm and the reasons it is an appropriate framework for this study. This chapter also recognizes challenges in producing critical interpretive CMC research and explaining qualitative content analysis. It then describes qualitative content analysis and argue that it is an effective research method for critical interpretive research, specifically in digital research topics. Later in this chapter, a description of thematic analysis as a useful coding scheme is included. Thematic analysis is a method used to gain deep insight by distilling data into a variety of themes and a very useful method for critical qualitative CMC research. The chapter concludes with an examination of the third-party applications used for data collection and a description of the coding process used for data analysis.

Chapter 4 of this dissertation examines the results of my thematic analysis. It includes a list of themes and criteria that details the ways themes were formed. I provide a detailed description of these themes by including information from current scholarly research related to each topic. I then include examples of tweets that were included in each theme. I conclude the chapter with a detailed analysis of the ways these themes align with the goals and questions set forth by the research questions.

The final chapter of this study weaves together the themes found throughout the study. Instead of examining each theme individually, I describe the connections between themes and note individuals and media organizations that occupied space in multiple themes or produced a wide variety of message types across multiple thematic categories. The chapter also makes note of limitations within the study and encourage new directions for future research.

CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

As prefaced in the introduction, this chapter begins by identifying and defining the key terms of terrorism/terrorist, social media, social media profiles, and imperialism. It then examines the theoretical foundations of impression management theory and detail the academic history of this theory. Connecting impression management to CMC research, the chapter explores the ways individuals use relevant concepts to create abusive personas online, and address shortcomings and limitation of this theory.

Conceptual Definitions

Terrorism/Terrorist

Terrorism and communication researcher Jonathan Matusitz (2013) notes that there is not a single, clear definition for terrorism; however, he notes that it is commonly described as “the use of violence to create fear (i.e. terror, psychic fear) for (1) political, (2) religious, or (3) ideological reasons” (p. 4). This mirrors the United States Department of Defense (2016) definition which states that terrorism is “the unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political” (para. 1). One additional piece of Matusitz’s (2013) definition is that the meaning of terrorism is socially constructed. I specifically mention this aspect because it discredits biological assumptions that certain individuals are more likely to commit terrorist acts. He also notes that modern terrorism is aimed at unprepared or peaceful targets and is designed to kill or injure hundreds of victims (Matusitz, 2013). I argue that the Boston Marathon Bombing most closely resembles this version of terrorism and will be the definition used throughout this research.

From a psychological perspective, researchers have found a variety of ‘causes’ for terrorism, but Kruglanski et al. (2013) argue that terrorists act because of a combination of factors such as trauma/shock, behavior rationalization, or the individual’s interpersonal interactions with members of their social networks. Their definition specifically excludes race, gender, sexuality, religion, and political affiliation that are all commonly associated with the terrorist image in American culture. This exclusion is important because popular media traditionally only use the term terrorist to describe Arab or Muslim men (Matusitz, 2013; Kruglanski et al., 2013).

Social Media

Obar and Wildman (2015) recognize that social media is difficult to define because of rapid changes in technology, a steady increase in innovative social networking applications, and difficulty distinguishing this term from individual social networking websites (SNS). In simplest terms, social media may best be defined as an accumulation of all SNS and other Web 2.0 technologies. This still raises the question “What is/are SNS?” boyd² and Ellison (2008) define SNS as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 221). Examples of SNS include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or Instagram (Obar, 2015). Although boyd’s and Ellison’s definition is still useful, SNS have grown to include newer elements such as swiping (Tinder) and geofencing (Yik Yak). These

² This is the preferred spelling of the researcher Danah boyd’s name. All citations in text and in the Reference page contain the preferred spelling.

examples challenge the aforementioned rules of connections but are widely recognized as niche SNS. These newer SNS also promote connections via physical distance. Users in these networks are only matched with or able to communicate with others in a predetermined physical space. Therefore, it is necessary to widen the previous definition to include a set of users within any physical geographic space. The inclusion of geographic space is important to the current functions of social media and is unlikely to be phased out. Furthermore, the notion of space is a valuable concept in imperialism, which will be examined later in this chapter.

Social Media Profiles

The social media profile is intimately connected to the first two points of boyd's and Ellison's (2008) definition. Throughout this research, I argue that these profiles exist as both extensions of selves and physical structures to be owned, furnished, and maintained by a user with access to this space. For now, I specifically address characteristics that are common across a wide variety of SNS and social media and the ways this profile is used to build networks and accomplish their interaction goals.

As boyd and Ellison (2008) described, the profile exists in a bounded system and contain a list of connections in that network. This means that a Facebook user can only use their profile to search for and interact with other users on Facebook. These same users may have connected profiles on other networks such as Instagram or Twitter, but each of these profiles and networks are restricted to their own SNS. These profiles also contain a photograph and biographic information that are critical to attracting network connections. Many of the most popular SNS, such as Facebook (2016), Twitter (2016), Instagram (2016), and Tinder (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg 2017), as well as older networks like Myspace (Massari, 2010), helped to popularize these biographic portions of the profile. Common characteristics of these pages are

personal photos, a short biography, and location information. This information allows users to search or be searched for by family friends, coworkers, or business connections.

Imperialism

Imperialism is a prominent interdisciplinary term that has been used and redefined by numerous scholars. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1993) defines imperialism as “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory” (p. 9). Tuhiwai Smith (2012) notes that imperialism has historically been used as economic expansion, subjugation of others, an idea of realization, and discursive field of knowledge. Head (2001) provides some of the most powerful descriptions of imperialism. He explains

“Imperialism may be defined as the pride which goes before a fall and if we merely think of it for a short while as pride it would soon appear to be, not the exclusive property of the British or Americans but a common ailment of mankind. It may also be the central core of all conflicts on earth for it needs two actors on the stage at the same time – the man who has got and the man who has apparently got nothing.” (pp. 17-18)

Head (2001) goes on to note that individuals must learn to live in the White man’s world and that words are a more powerful tool of imperialism than guns. These definitions are important because they dismantle the common belief that imperialism and colonialism are synonymous. While colonialism requires military and political action in acquiring foreign territories and is often viewed as a British action (Ferguson, 2003), Said (1993) and Head (2001)

note that imperialism persists beyond these actions by living on in the attitudes of the populous. Said (1993) specifically mentions that Americans struggle to recognize this distinction because direct colonialism is rare in the contemporary world and because American colonialism/imperialism have been reframed and redefined as “greatness” and “peace-keeping.” Bascara (2006) supports this belief by noting that imperialism is often reframed as a problem that was solved by Americans. I expand on these concepts later in this dissertation as I draw from Feagin’s (2010) research about the American White Racial Frame.

I contend that these definitions and views of imperialism can be applied to the existing space SNS occupy in terms of physical space and cultural values. Because White men are the most common demographic group hired in US technology jobs (Brown, 2016) and can design these networks, these spaces become their ‘exclusive property.’ Furthermore, social media has been labeled as one of the current foremost dividers during times of intercultural conflict (Giridharadas, 2015).

Alatas (2000) also examined the notion of imperialism in ways that can be applied to social media. One of the most important factors in his description of imperialism is his argument that imperialism is not restricted to politics and economics. Instead, he recognizes the imperialism of ideas, which is vital to understanding digital imperialism. He also notes that exploitation and tutelage are key elements of imperialism which I find relevant to social media (Alatas, 2000). The expectation to share information on social media profiles may be exploitative depending on the user’s interaction goals. Each SNS also creates a series of rules and guidelines for users to learn and follow. Brock (2012) has noted that people of color, specifically Black individuals, have also been criticized and taught about proper ways to use hashtags by White bloggers. For example, he recognizes a post by White blogger Nick Douglas in the blog Too

Much Nick in which Douglas argued that Black Twitter users do not have real friends and focus primarily on communication through hashtag interaction. This is one example of how Twitter usage is moderated by White individuals.

Simulated Imperialism

Perhaps the most appropriate imperialist concept related to digital spaces is simulated imperialism. Hom (2013) defines simulated imperialism as the three interlocking operations of “the signification of imperial processes generated by simulacra; the amplification of colonizing projects through simulation; and the interpellation of hybrid subjects articulated between (im)mobility and (in)animation” (p. 26). In Hom’s (2013) research of the simulated imperialism of Disney theme parks, she notes that people pay to be exposed to Disney memorabilia, architecture, and culture until they become subconsciously immersed in the experience. Instead of examining this concept at a similar micro level, I focus on the longstanding American cultural ideals that celebrate Whiteness later in this chapter.

The definitions of terrorism, social media, social media profiles, and imperialism provide a framework for the remainder of this study. I aim to expand on these concepts and connect them to specific bodies of research related to Digital Whiteness Imperialism. Throughout the rest of the current chapter, though, I examine impression management and the ways it is connected to terrorism, social media, and social media profiles.

Theorizing Impression Management

Impression management theory has proven to be versatile across a wide variety of academic disciplines since it was introduced to social psychologists by Erving Goffman in 1956. In the decades since its introduction, this theory has been used to examine social psychological topics, corporate research (Lilqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014; Spear & Roper, 2013), cultural

studies (Berbrier, 1999), and CMC studies (Becker & Stamp, 2006; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hall, Pennington, & Lueders, 2013; Walther, 1993). I aim to explain key elements of impression management interspersed with examples that highlight the theory's evolution and the scholars that provided meaningful contributions to the current literature. I also explain how this theory has been meaningful to contemporary CMC and social media studies.

In the introduction to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1956) lays the groundwork for impression management and even addresses some of its limitations; however, it is his comparison to theater that most accurately describes the basic functions of this theory. Much like actors in a theatrical performance, individuals present themselves and their interests in ways that are designed to provoke a (favorable) response from others. In this scenario, each audience member is responsible for deciphering these behaviors and acting in a way that defines the communal situation for everyone involved (Goffman, 1956). I open with this metaphor for impression management because it is important to recognize that this theory, like communication, is a collaborative act. It is important to acknowledge this collaboration at this time because many of the scholars that have researched this theory in the decades since Goffman's initial report have underemphasized this point.

Goffman (1956) indicates that individuals consciously or subconsciously recognize the importance of their social counterparts when using impression management to control a social situation. This occurs because, at the most basic level, impression management is a goal-directed behavior (Chen, 2011). When an individual presents him/herself in a way that is favorable to the appropriate demographic they can earn physical rewards or social rewards, such as respect, popularity, information, or simply preferable treatment (Chen, 2011). Goffman (1956) addresses these rewards in his 1956 publication. He explains "society is organized on the principle that any

individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in a correspondingly appropriate way” (p. 6).

There are several ways that impression management occurs subconsciously or unconsciously as well. For example, Berbrier (1999) recognizes conscious impression management strategies by White supremacist groups. He notes that these groups use redefinition and evasion as conscious ways of avoiding the “racist” label. Jensen and Collins (2008) found that racial extremism is one of the most controversial topics in America. Berbrier’s (1999) research supports this belief by explaining how many individuals work to change the discourse related to their views by circumventing the negative connotations of the term “racist.” This is noteworthy to impression management studies in examining how individuals with controversial or socially unacceptable beliefs can earn a wider variety of social support without rejecting their existing beliefs.

Berbrier’s (1999) study emphasizes another key component of impression management: cognitive harmony. I highlight this point later in this study, but I include it here as an important element of the theory’s foundational framework. Becker, Beckers, Franzmann, and Hagenah (2016) note that this harmony may be achieved by the avoidance of dissonant information. Goffman (1956) asserts that an individual’s first impression limits their future personality or character development. Although new details will emerge naturally, any action that sharply contradicts the initial impression may lead to a negative redefinition of a relationship between social actors. These contradictions may reduce cognitive harmony for the individual that was incapable of maintaining a preferred relationship based on the initial impression (Goffman, 1956).

Impression Management & Computer-Mediated Communication

Impression management theory has played a key role in CMC research since the early 1990s. In an early study of CMC impression management, Walther (1993) discovered that individuals in digital settings form beliefs of others in ways that closely resemble interpersonal interaction. This occurs because CMC between strangers can mimic the initial uncertainty of meeting a stranger. In both situations, it is important for an individual to establish a favorable impression that leads to a positive social interaction (Goffman, 1956). This study is an important step in the evolution of impression-management because it inspired future studies that grew along with technology during the internet boom of the mid-1990s (NetHistoryInfo, 2004). These later studies focused on the ways internet users have established identities (Donath, 1999; Turkle, 1995), begun romantic relationships (Ellison, et al., 2006), and been useful in corporate branding (Spear & Roper, 2013) and customer service (Lilqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). Additionally, these studies have been examined through different perspective models (Hall et al., 2013), explored impression management tactics over time (Bolino, Klotz, & Daniels, 2014), and re-introduced the importance of impression management from the perspective of others (Utz, 2010). In this research, I examine these studies and highlight the scholars that produced this work as important factors in the evolution of computer-mediated impression management.

The first element of CMC impression management relevant to this dissertation is the importance of identity formation. Early research by Turkle (1995) indicates that individuals used text-based CMC tools to establish favorable identities in different situations. Through interviews, Turkle (1995) found that some individuals create ideal identities because they feel less inhibited in a semi-anonymous medium. Furthermore, these users were able to reduce cognitive disharmony by establishing multiple digital personalities. Through careful (but rapid) cycling of

identities, users were able to maintain multiple positive social interactions in different digital settings (Turkle, 1995). Donath (1999) expanded on CMC identity formation by focusing on the ability to deceive online. In contrast to Turkle's (1995) findings that individuals alter their personality when they feel less inhibited, Donath (1999) finds clear deception in online media. One reason for this deception is the absence of a physical body. Without this anchor point, she contends that individuals are free to deceive others in semi-anonymous digital settings such as chat rooms or message forums.

Ellison et al. (2006) advanced the ideas of identity formation and deception by applying impression management studies to online dating profiles. The findings from this study cannot be underemphasized. This research is a critical study and an important step in the evolution of CMC impression management because, unlike digital-only environments, online dating services are designed to encourage physical, interpersonal meetings (Ellison, et al., 2006). This becomes a unique challenge for individuals as they strive to maintain positive social communication based on profiles that may have been embellished or deceptive. The researchers discovered that impressions were formed in two levels: (1) profile creation and (2) face-to-face interactions (Ellison et al., 2006). At the profile-creation level, the researchers made three important discoveries about the way initial impressions were designed. First, online daters made conscious decisions about the information that was included in their profiles. This conscious impression management strategy was used as a tactic to attract only certain individuals with specific common values or interests. A second impression management tactic was the 'ideal self' strategy. This approach differs from deception because several online daters use an enhanced profile of themselves to compete with other desirable daters and to create attainable goals (such as weight loss) that can be reached before a face-to-face meeting (Ellison, et al., 2006). The third

impression management strategy comes from being limited by technology. Many online dating services use closed-ended options for users to create their profiles. These limited responses can be problematic for users who are stymied in their ability to create a favorable impression under these restricting circumstances (Ellison, et al., 2006).

This same study made another important finding in digital impression management research (Ellison et al., 2006). Ellison et al. (2006) found that inaccurate self-portrayals were a source of frustration for others. Their study shows that many individuals felt deceived by conscious decisions to create idealized selves, inaccurate depictions when constrained by technology, and even unintentional deception by individuals that have an inaccurate self-perception. These findings are meaningful in establishing the impression management strategies that combine digital and face-to-face interactions.

The aforementioned studies of Walther (1993), Turkle (1995), Donath (1999), and Ellison et al. (2006) created the framework for many studies involving contemporary social media websites, particularly Facebook. Facebook is a unique platform for CMC impression management because it combines elements of these studies and is a popular form of communication amongst many demographics (Pew Research, 2013). It is also distinctive because it is less anonymous than earlier CMC programs, users design one profile that appeals to a group of known and unknown individuals, and Facebook users often maintain face-to-face and digital relationships with many of their connections (Facebook Principles, 2015).

Another interesting aspect of Facebook is the role of connections in constructing favorable impressions. This occurs because Facebook connections can write comments, share web content, and add photos to a user's wall (Facebook Privacy Basics, 2015). Although users can limit these functions through privacy settings or manually delete this content, the role of

third-party associates contributes to the impression given on a user's profile. Walther et al. (2008) found that third-party content is seen as more reliable than the self-presentation of the user. This content includes wall posts, tagged photos, and shared apps available on Facebook. Additionally, the content provided in these messages contribute to the perceived physical attractiveness of the profile owner. These findings are supported by Utz (2010) who found that the number of friends and their perceived popularity contribute to positive social standing of a Facebook user. Scott (2014) also found that Facebook users with a higher number of perceived extraverted friends were viewed as more socially and physically attractive.

To this point, I have examined Facebook impression management studies from the perception of a profile viewer; however, I have not considered the accuracy of these perceptions. Hall et al. (2013) found that strangers were able to make accurate judgments about an individual's agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness only through their Facebook profile. Being able to accurately assess an individual's personality characteristics from a social media profile can be detrimental to an individual as well. Research on corporate cybervetting, which is defined as the process of using the Internet to find information about job candidates and other people (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014) often leads employers to an individual's social media profiles. Also, some employers require individuals to sign in to their Facebook profiles during job interviews, require social media users to connect with human resources representatives, or agree to share their profile information through third-party services during the job application/vetting process (Mcfarland, 2012). This can become an additional challenge for individuals who have used impression-management tactics that are consistent with their personalities around friends and family members rather than the impression they hope to display to employers.

Advantages and Shortcomings of Impression Management Theory

One of the primary advantages of Goffman's (1956) impression management theory is the flexibility of this theory to cross multiple communication channels. Whether individuals are attempting to earn social capital by using impression management in daily interactions or a media personality is trying to attract a larger audience or an individual uses language to frame a situation in the absence of physical cues, they are all using impression management. These findings extend to Goffman's (1956) foundation structure of this theory that has been emphasized throughout this dissertation.

One of the shortcomings of this theory in relation to digital studies is lack of available research. While several important studies in the evolution of digital impression management are presented in this literature review, many popular and important internet subcultures have been ignored by impression management research. One reason for this is due to anonymity. For example, Phillips (2015) stated the obvious growth of trolling culture online and in contemporary society; however, impression management studies in this area are nearly nonexistent due to these individuals' desire to remain anonymous and to deceive mainstream society. Furthermore, impression management strategies of participants in digital fan communities, activist groups, and gaming communities have received little attention from impression management scholars. I now aim to describe several of the critical intercultural concepts that I believe are uniquely tied to impression management theory.

Critical Intercultural Communication Concepts**Theorizing Identity, Privilege, and Whiteness**

This portion of chapter two examines three important concepts related to critical intercultural communication. The concepts of identity, privilege, and Whiteness are examined

defined and explained from a critical perspective. I also introduce digital concepts to these explanations.

Identity

Jackson II and Moshin (2010) define identity as “the names given to locate broad social histories, critical person antecedents, and subjective interpretations of others that encase our realities” (p. 348). Howard (2000) echoes this point and notes that an individual’s identity includes the elements that create a sense of who a person is. These characteristics may include race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, occupation, location, and more (Turner, 2000). Zevallos (2011) also stresses the importance of recognizing that these characteristics are internalized and shape the way we are and the ways we hope to be viewed. In sum, identity relates to the intersectionality of the characteristics that define an individual throughout a series of changing social contexts. It is also necessary to recognize that identity is not static and changes frequently due to new life experiences, cultural shifts, and relationships (Turner, 2000).

One challenging aspect of identity is the need for others to quantify and label an individual’s identity. Examples of this labeling can be found in nearly every facet of American culture such as health, sports, and policy. One example of this is the National Institute of Health’s (NIH) quantitative measures of race and ethnicity in funded studies (Eisenhower, Suyemoto, Lucchese, & Canenguez, 2014). These researchers found that NIH measures are not accurate in reflecting participants’ experiences or understanding of their health. In sports, researchers have examined gender and sexuality identity differences in female athletes (Kane, Lavoie, & Fink, 2013) as well as exploring racial identity in team names, logos, (Turner, 2015) and media depictions (Billings, 2004). Finally, recent controversy related to gender and sexual

identity has led to policy changes in public bathroom laws (Archibald, 2014), university campuses (Dirks, 2016), and places of employment (Rudin et al. 2016.).

This desire to measure identity excludes a variety of factors that contribute to an individual's self and public display. These identity markers also tend to ignore the notion that elements that determine an individual's identity are often founded in American dominant culture's White racial frame (Feagin, 2010). These inconsistent identity measures exist as a way of maintaining a social hierarchy by creating Others and an I-Other dialectic in contemporary society. Jackson II and Moshin (2013) explain this concept by comparing this dialectic to the structure of a sentence. They argue that marginalized groups are the frequent object that is controlled by the subject (dominant groups). By acknowledging these points, I aim to accomplish three goals in this segment of this chapter. First, I explore themes related to White identity. As Feagin (2010) points out, American society has been founded on the idea that White culture is the norm and all others exist in this White cultural frame. Second, I examine the construction of the Other the I-Other dialectic. Finally, I apply these concepts to digital media to explore the ways these same identities are negotiated in these online spaces with the absence of physical cues. As previously written, I aim to identify the ways this White identity has been created and maintained online.

This research focuses on the White racial identity. I choose this identity characteristic because it is considered the norm in American culture and it encompasses gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and other identity markers. It is also commonly assumed by visual depictions (Quail, 2011). The pervasiveness of this identifying characteristic creates a schism between White individuals that acknowledge the normalcy of this race and others who deny it. Hughey (2010) examined this social division through observation of a White nationalist

organization and a White antiracist activist group. Through observation and interviews, the researcher furthers a conceptual framework of hegemonic Whiteness and recognizes that these groups both “simultaneously produce and maintain racial cohesion and difference” (p. 1290). Hughey (2010) provides two reasons for this racial cohesion. First, simply by organizing into separate groups, these societies both position their agenda as superior to non-White practices. The second way these groups maintain racial cohesion is by marginalizing White practices that do not promote group ideals. This study is important because it acknowledges that individuals are recognizing the ways their identities exist among various social structures; however, whether these people are challenging or supporting the existing social standing of their identity, their reactions are based on existing “racist ideologies, reactionary cultural repertoires and scripts, and material practices of domination” (p. 1290).

Jackson II (1999) examined White identity from a much different perspective. He used a discursive mapping technique to understand how White students at a predominately Black university define their White identities through the lens of a Black researcher. Five categories emerged from this study. The first category was Whiteness as incompleteness. Individuals that existed in this category were either unsure of how to define Whiteness, identified it as just American culture or felt as if they had no culture. The second category that emerged situated White characteristics as mainstream societal norms that non-White individuals must idealize and conform to. This closely resembles a previous point of establishing societal dress codes (Lorenz & Murray, 2014). Third, Jackson II (1999) found that participants identified Whiteness as a metaphor for a universal insider. This metaphor reflects an upcoming point of Eberhardt and Freeman’s (2015) study of Iggy Azalea. Participants that identified this metaphor felt that White individuals can be accepted in many social situations and behaviors were often altered to

acknowledge their presence (Jackson II, 1999). The final two strategies, Whiteness as guilty and fair space and Whiteness as situationally immutable, explore the way this concept is interactive among others. In the Whiteness as guilty and fair space strategy, White students discourse reflected the idea that White social space was “open and shareable” (p. 48). The Whiteness as situationally immutable strategy reflected an individual’s ability to behaviorally codeswitch at appropriate times and opportunities.

Otherizing and Naming

Thus far, this literature review has primarily examined how White individuals define and acknowledge identity; however, people also exist without the benefits of a White identity and they are typically referred to as Others (Jackson II & Moshin, 2010). In simplest terms, to be the Other is to simply be different from the norm (Jackson II & Moshin, 2010). Otherizing is not solely related to race though. Individuals can become Otherized based on characteristics including gender, sexuality, age, class, and religion as well (Zevallos, 2011). Jackson II and Moshin, (2010) also recognize that Otherizing occurs through naming. The authors describe examples such as “Jew” being synonymous with cheap or “Gay” meaning uncool (p. 349). Through this naming process, individuals are classified as something that exists apart from acceptable social standards.

This naming process is used in other contexts relevant to the Boston Marathon Bombing as well. The first example of naming includes adding a qualifier before the word “American(s)”, to individuals that are not visibly White. Spickard (2007) describes a long-term teaching exercise that examines how people view the “most American” ethnic groups of American citizens. He found remarkable consistency in European groups, such as English and Irish, being ranked as more American than Mexican, Black, American Indian, Japanese, and Arab Americans. These

results indicate that even individuals born, educated, and living in the United States are ranked on a hierarchical system of what it means to be American based on their ethnic and racial heritage. More specifically to the current research, Arab Americans have been consistently ranked as the “least American” racial group in these experiments (1999, p. 8). I mention this because Arab Americans are perceived to be nearly synonymous with Islam. I contend that this low opinion of Arab Americans and the close relationship with Islamic beliefs is amplified in the false belief that only men of Middle East descent or Islamic beliefs can be labeled as a terrorist.

As stated earlier in this dissertation, researchers have challenged the notion that terrorism is a biological trait, but is instead an act of performative violence against a peaceful target (Matusitz, 2013). Despite these findings, American media frequently frame any terrorist attack as “Radical Islamic” to further the narrative that terrorism can only be committed by Arab or Muslim individuals (Matusitz, 2013). This naming process that associates terrorism and Islam can be seen in contemporary American research. For example, Larkin (2009) referred to the Columbine attackers, and subsequent mass shooters, as “rampage shooters” (p. 1309). Most rampage shooters, such as Dylann Storm Roof, Adam Lanza, and James Holmes are young White males. In many of these examples, individuals are often apprehended by police, tried in court, and their home lives are often covered favorably by media (Hesse, 2015). The naming process and media coverage of these individuals differs sharply from attacks and controversies from non-White individuals, despite similarities in their actions. Furthermore, the ‘alt-right’ Americans have established a patriotic image even though their messages and behaviors most often align with hate group messages (Anti-Defamation League, 2016). Members of the alt-right frequently view inclusiveness and multiculturalism as problems in their country(ies) that they aim to stop or

change (Dewey, 2016). The framing and media depictions of Muslim individuals compared to the alt-right Americans show the importance of the naming groups in America.

Zevallos (2011) notes that Otherness is also characterized as being dichotomous. This reflects the I-Other dialectic that is created through both language and actions. Jackson II and Moshin (2010) note that marginalized groups are most often positioned as the Other and are the “perpetual object” compared to Whiteness as the “perpetual subject.” However, it is important to note that this I-Other dialectic exists based on self-definition of identity as well (Jackson, 1999). Jackson II and Moshin (2010) provide examples of Henry Louis Gates and Bill Cosby who both identify as Black men but did not recognize their standing inside of their own racial community until faced with social realities. This indicates that the I-Other dialectic is not just a separation of White identity and Otherness but also an indication of where an individual views himself or herself inside the social hierarchy compared to others.

Shaping Identity in Digital Contexts

The final goal of this section is to explore the ways that these identities are shaped and managed in a digital context. As previously mentioned, many of these virtual spaces have been developed maintained by White males (Williams, 2015) in a type of digital imperialism. The emergence of new social media technology, online gaming, and online dating has created new opportunities to establish an identity in the absence of social cues (Ellison et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2013; Suler, 2004). This absence alters the creation of an Other because race, ethnicity, gender, etc. are not always immediately known; however, different cues such as language use, profile pictures, and solipsistic introjection (Suler, 2004) contribute to similar patterns of White male identity and the I-Other dialectic online.

Developments in technology and increases in social network participation have led to new challenges for identity creation and maintenance in online settings. Brock (2012) has examined the rhetorical construction and use of hashtags for creating a Black presence online. Other hashtags, such as the #NotYourAsianSidekick existed as a symbol among individuals to identify as Asian or Asian-American and to resist unfair treatment (Okolosie, 2014). More recently, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag has become a battleground for digital racial identification (Horowitz & Livingston, 2016). This hashtag is used simultaneously as a call for Black Americans and allies to challenge police brutality and systemic discrimination against Black individuals and a target of hate speech by detractors of this movement (Tynes, Schuschke, & Noble, 2016). It is also important to recognize that these spaces and hashtags frequently mute the voices and opinions of non-White and queer women. Tynes, Schuschke, and Noble (2016) have argued that these muted digital voices mirror their offline challenges and create a framework for a digital intersectionality theory, specifically related to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The concepts and theories described in this portion of the research leads to the next important intercultural communication concept: Privilege.

Privilege

One of the underlying characteristics of identity is privilege. Hastie and Rimmington (2014) explain that “privilege tends to be unspoken and rarely visible to those who possess privileged identities, and it also allows one to ignore the fact that others do not have access to such advantages” (p. 187). Although this study has focused on White identity, it is important to recognize that privilege is not a concept solely related to race. Research can be used as a pedagogical tool that shows privilege is also related to gender, sexuality, religion, disability, and more (Allen, 2011). Therefore, privilege is not a static characteristic where all individuals with a

certain trait receive equal amounts of privilege. Instead, a person's privilege exists based on cultural and social spaces that they occupy. In the following description of this concept, I specifically address examples related to occupation and culture. I focus on these examples for their significance in the technology industry and social media culture.

In addition to addressing the existence of privilege, it is important to examine different examples that show how it exists in modern social structures. Bertrand and Mullainathan (2011) used resumes that contained identical work experiences but differed by traditionally White and Black sounding names. They found that individuals with traditionally White names were 50% more likely to receive a callback for a job opportunity and that the gap between Whites and Blacks expands based on the quality of their resumes. This study contrasts the belief that all individuals have equal access to employment and income (Civil Rights, 2004). An example like this clearly identifies the privilege of White individuals as well as a confirmation of Hastie and Rimmington's (2014) argument that individuals with privilege often fail to recognize that they have it.

This example of occupational discrimination is often found in the technology industry in the US. A 2015 article indicates that Black individuals make up only 1% of tech workers at both Google and Yahoo, Black individuals were the least represented demographic of tech workers at Apple, and Hispanics made up less than 10% of the tech workforce at both Apple and Yahoo (Brown, 2015). Marcus (2015) also found that women make up about 33% of the tech industry and even less in leadership positions. Examples of this stem from Twitter, a company that had an all-White, male board of directors until the first woman was appointed to the board in 2013 and the first Black individual and third woman was hired in 2016 (Peck, 2016). These reports also recognize that Asian-Americans are the only non-White racial group to be well-represented in

the tech industry. Furthermore, White male individuals have been labeled as the earliest adopters of digital technology tools. This early adoption has also contributed to a stereotype that Black individuals are not proficient or interested in technology (Heyward, 2012) even though 78% of Black individuals are internet users (Perrin & Duggan, 2015)

Privilege exists outside of hiring practices as well. A second example of privilege examines the appropriation of another racial culture by White individuals in an attempt to earn social and material benefits. Eberhardt and Freeman (2015) examine the way musicians, particularly White rapper Iggy Azalea, benefit from other racial cultures to a degree that is unattainable of other individuals. They note that Iggy Azalea's use of African American English (AAE) helps her to be "met with material rewards of Blackness far beyond what African Americans reap, and at the same time, reinforces standards of beauty, desirability, and acceptability – all linked to Whiteness – already affirmed in popular culture" (p. 321). This example of privilege raises another important point. It highlights the rewards that White individuals may earn by adopting stereotypically Black characteristics to maintain success in a predominantly Black industry; however, the opposite of this argument is not necessarily true. Lorenz and Murray (2014) argue that Black fashion was regulated in the National Basketball Association (NBA) as a way of making the game "safer" for middle-class White American audiences that watch on TV and attend live games. This point was reinforced by recent statements from multiple owners of NBA teams (ESPN Services, 2014; Moore & Avila, 2014) and a report that indicates predominantly White ownership in the league (Chalabi, 2014). These examples emphasize the point that the privilege of Whiteness comes from adopting others' cultural practices and the necessity of other racial groups to adopt White traditions to achieve success.

Whiteness

The dissertation will provide an overview of contemporary views of Whiteness that exist in mainstream channels. I then transition into a more detailed explanation of Whiteness that is supported by more credible research. These examples address elements of identity and privilege, but more complete descriptions of these concepts occur later in this chapter.

One of the most challenging aspects of Whiteness and privilege discourse in contemporary America is the misconception that it stems from racism and that activist groups that acknowledge it should be labeled as hate groups (Hanson & McCormack, 2015). This belief is created by the current hegemonic power structure and advanced through traditional news and information channels (Hanson & McCormack, 2015). This confusion related to Whiteness also stems from conscious and subconscious attempts at misleading an audience combined with constricting formats for delivering such complicated messages.

Individuals looking for more robust descriptions of Whiteness through traditional media can find them online in reviews of reliable academic studies. One example comes from the *Psychology Today* website. In this article, Lyubansky (2011) explains three components that make up Whiteness. The first element of Whiteness observes racial identity. Simply, the author argues that individuals that identify as White struggle less with their racial identity because of the American social construction of race. This normative racial descriptor creates conflict, especially when discussing social rights and privilege for people of color or activism such as the Million Man March or #BlackLivesMatter because White individuals often struggle to recognize the importance of race to other groups (Hastie & Rimmington, 2014). Instead, these issues raise social concerns from White individuals that do not recognize their race as a social norm.

Lyubansky's (2011) second component of Whiteness examines the social construction of a racial hierarchy. This hierarchy builds off the previous point of White racial identity being viewed as the norm. Historically, White individuals, specifically men, have had better access to education (Bell, 2004) and have been better represented in business ownership and politics (Reynolds, 2014). This hierarchy has been established as a cultural norm and any challenges to this standard, such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Hanson & McCormack, 2015), have contributed to the misidentification of Whiteness as hate.

The third component of Whiteness is racial privilege. This point has been considered earlier in this chapter but is now reinforced and expanded because this is essential to establishing a clear understanding of Whiteness. An important part of privilege is recognizing that White Americans rarely have to acknowledge their racial identity or consider how it may impact their lives and their physical, social, and economic opportunities (Lyubansky, 2011). In addition to access to racial privileges such as job opportunities (Feagin, 2010) and police protection (Rhodan, 2014), it is also important to recognize that these benefits are not simply applied to all White individuals. Research shows that factors such as gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status all impact access to White privilege (Jackson II and Moshin, 2010). Nakayama and Krizek (1995) touch on this point by recognizing that White women are likely to feel less threatened by a Whiteness label than men because their gender places them in a different cultural space.

These descriptions of Whiteness and privilege dominate public discourse, but it is important to examine some of the research that has led to these descriptions. In *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, Feagin (2010) adds important research to each of Lyubansky's (2011) points. He does this by describing an invisible White

racial frame in which Americans are generally unaware they exist in. He defines this frame as “an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate” (p. 3). This description is a more accurate introduction to the concept of Whiteness than Lyubansky’s article but still lacks much of the nuance and historical examples necessary to develop an adequate understanding of this concept. The following examples continue to build on this foundation and add more detailed explanations to both the roots of Whiteness and contemporary studies of it.

In *Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger (1991) used elements of Marxist research, psychoanalysis, and labor history to examine the ways Whiteness underpinned American labor by reinforcing the use of previously constructed racial stereotypes while simultaneously creating a culture where White was the standard. This creation of a White social norm mirrors Feagin’s (2011) White frame but provides important relevant factors related to identity. Examples of this include Blackfaced Whiteness, which can be defined as a redefinition of Blackness from a White perspective. This historical perspective brought together various economic classes in a mutual amusement of Black language and culture. Although “Blackfaced Whiteness” (Roediger, 1993, p. 116) is not socially acceptable in contemporary society, a literal example of this concept still occurs with examples of Halloween costumes and theme parties that include Blackface or portrayals of victims of assault/brutality (Chow, 2013). To a lesser degree, this concept still exists in more socially acceptable practices through the reappropriation of Black culture in dress (Lorenz & Murray, 2014), music, and entertainment (Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015).

Nakayama and Krizek’s groundbreaking 1995 study examined the discursive space of “White” because “‘White’ is a relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible as it

continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain” (p. 291).

Through textual analysis, survey, and interviews, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) found that the dynamic power of Whiteness allows it to be many things at once simply by choosing to recognize or ignore it. Regardless of recognition, the existence of Whiteness exists in both universal and particular contexts and serves as an element of an individual’s identity.

Nakayama and Krizek (1995) conclude their article with three aspects of reflexivity of Whiteness they view as meaningful to researchers of communication studies. The first point states “reflexivity encourages consideration of that which has been silenced or invisible in academic discussions” (p. 303). This means that it is imperative for academics to recognize Whiteness in their daily lives and in the way they produce research and view the social norms that guide their assumptions. The second purpose of reflexivity relates to the way Whiteness interacts with the researcher’s position in social and academic structures. The final point they acknowledge is the “examination of the institutions and politics that produce ‘knowledge’” (p. 303). Nakayama and Krizek (1995) argue that Whiteness exists beyond the scope of academia and by ignoring this phenomenon, researchers contribute to its lingering invisibility.

A final component of Whiteness examined in this review of research is digital Whiteness. I explore this phenomenon because it is currently understudied and many scholars overlook this point in their discussions and research of Whiteness in contemporary society. It is also important in the construction of identity as the growth of social media, online dating, and online gaming contribute to the ways individuals establish and support their identities (Gasmuck, Martin, & Zhao, 2009). Furthermore, race is unevenly constructed online and misrepresented in media. Heyward (2012) indicates that media reinforces a stereotype that Black individuals have less interest in technology and are not proficient in using it. Unfortunately, statistics related to hiring

people of color and women in digital occupations (Williams, 2015) furthers the notion that the many digital spaces are created, maintained, and operated through a White racial frame.

Throughout this portion of the chapter I have drawn from critical intercultural communication, media studies, cultural studies, history, and social media research to define Whiteness, privilege, and examine the ways these concepts relate to the formation of identity. I have also expanded these concepts to the growing field of digital communication and social media research. In addition to defining these concepts, I have used history, current events, and relevant academic research to show the ways these concepts create social power through Whiteness, naming, and the I-Other dialectic. This chapter concludes with a brief analysis of the importance of these studies and directions for future research.

In contemporary American culture, social norms are quickly changing. Research (Berbrier, 1999; Jensen & Collins, 2008) recognize that Americans are distancing themselves from controversial issues such as race and ethnicity. At the surface level, it is a positive step for Americans move away from the open racist ideologies of the recent past. Unfortunately, as I have expressed throughout this dissertation, many of these individuals are still unable to recognize Whiteness and the privilege they access in their daily lives. Whiteness studies are important for encouraging reflexivity among the population that have recently been introduced to these terms through traditional media channels in recent years.

It is also important to recognize the ways that Whiteness and privilege have shaped politics and business in the United States for several centuries (Feagin, 2010; Roediger, 1991). White individuals, primarily men, have shaped the cultural and economic foundations for America and have largely excluded Others. Hughey (2010) has found that even supportive White Americans sometimes fail to recognize that their beliefs are created upon centuries of hegemonic

Whiteness. Recognition of this construct is needed to create a more even distribution of Others in higher positions in the social, economic, and political hierarchy.

Although I have briefly examined Whiteness in digital spaces in this study, it is still an underdeveloped area of research. Currently, inferences can be made about Whiteness in this area and hypotheses can be generated from existing research related to Whiteness and identity but further conceptualization of these concepts is still necessary.

Cognitive Dissonance

Before moving ahead to the social media and space portion of this chapter, I address one more theory that is important to the connection of impression management and CMC.

Throughout this dissertation, I have mentioned the prominence of cognitive harmony in impression management. I have also described the difficulties in maintaining cognitive harmony on Facebook profiles because users must appeal to a large number of individuals that are spread across a continuum of relational closeness. In this section, I expand on the concept of cognitive dissonance and apply it to digital impression management strategies at two levels: (1) cognitive dissonance between digital life and real life and (2) cognitive dissonance in digital networks.

First, it is important to provide a definition and brief history of cognitive dissonance. Stone (2009) defines this theory as a feeling that “arises when the beliefs, values, or opinions individuals hold (that is, their cognitions) come into conflict with their experience of reality” (p. 73) and addresses the ways that individuals may reduce this discomfort. Stated more simply, this theory contends that individuals experience psychological discomfort when they hold two or more inconsistent (*dissonant*) beliefs (*cognitions*) and become motivated to lessen these feelings. This theory was first introduced by Festinger (1957) and is based on two basic hypotheses. The first hypothesis states, “the existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will

motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance” (Festinger, 1957, p. 3). The second hypothesis proposes that individuals will also actively avoid situations and ideas that would create more dissonance (Festinger, 1957). These hypotheses have formed the foundation of a rich body of research that I aim to apply to impression management and explore in greater detail.

Cognitive dissonance directly relates to Goffman’s (1956) belief that individuals are limited in the ways they can relate to other social actors after creating an initial impression. Furthermore, cognitive dissonance has an important function in CMC impression management, specifically in social media studies. One of the unique elements of social media profiles is the ability to create an ideal network (Facebook Privacy, 2015). I previously described the challenges in creating favorable impressions in diverse communities, such as Facebook, but motivated users can utilize privacy options to limit what specific individuals or groups have access to viewing or commenting on (Facebook Privacy, 2015). Unfortunately, for many users, these favorable impressions created in ideal networks do not translate into their real lives and sometimes lead to less life or career satisfaction (Burge, 2014). Several examples exist of individuals who create perfect online personas but struggle with relational, occupational, social, and medical issues that would contradict their digital lives. Dissonance between digital life and real life has very real effects on many individuals and often exist because of the options available to create an ideal self (Burge, 2014).

A second occurrence of digital cognitive dissonance transpires solely in an individual’s digital social network. Yun et al. (2013) report that individuals are more likely to observe and comment on weblogs that are consistent with their own beliefs. This finding can be easily applied to the microblog social media website Twitter. On Twitter, users choose from

individuals, news/entertainment sources, and corporations they receive messages (Twitter, 2015). It can be argued that creating ideal Twitter networks is a subconscious and proactive attempt at reducing dissonance. This same practice can be applied to the individual's followers as well since they are equally likely to only follow individuals that support their beliefs and opinions (Twitter, 2015). Although individuals create ideal networks, Twitter still reflects real life in some important ways, specifically with self-disclosure (Twitter, 2015). It is nearly inevitable that, despite using positive impression management strategies, a user will eventually disclose a belief or opinion that is inconsistent with the digital personality that has been created or is considered socially inappropriate (Ellison et al., 2006). It is difficult to avoid these circumstances, as Festinger (1957) would suggest, because even deletion of a message or profile does not guarantee that an image of the controversial message has not been captured or that the message does not become a source of discussion in a broader digital network. Impression management research in these scenarios is still in its infancy and reliable findings regarding these areas are needed.

In this segment of this theoretical perspectives chapter, I have provided definitions for important terms, concepts, and theories. I have also outlined the foundational elements of impression management and its evolution into a useful theory in contemporary CMC and social media research. These descriptions and examples of important impression management were also compared to cognitive dissonance because of the connections between digital and real lives. I have also connected this theory to the intercultural communication concepts of identity, privilege, and Whiteness I now move on to the final segment of this chapter: Social Media and Space.

Social Media and Space

In the previous portions of this chapter, I have described social media profiles as extensions of selves, and in most situations, ideal selves. I have primarily examined how these selves are shaped by privilege and ways individuals are otherized in American culture. I used these descriptions as ways of establishing the loss of culture for individuals during imperialism. In this chapter, I build on this theory by examining the second major component of imperialism: space. I draw from theories of proxemics, nonverbal communication, imperialism, architecture, sociology, and digital mapping to argue that the social media profiles simultaneously exist as extensions of identity and physical spaces. I also use these concepts to describe how individual profiles exist as micro spaces, or territories, in the macro social media structure. Throughout these descriptions, I include information about the ways this culture has been created long before the advent of social media and the ways it is maintained in the contemporary digital culture.

Digital Profiles as Micro Spaces

Before examining theories and concepts related to space, it is important to define space, acknowledge assumptions about this concept, and explore the connections between space and communication. As I progress through this research, I ascribe to the belief that physical and digital spaces exist as perceptions. Furthermore, I include Edward T. Hall's (1966) research on proxemics and the roles they play in the construction of social media profiles and networks and Cass Sunstein's (2009) studies about polarization and extremism in these networks.

Pop (2014) notes that spaces are homogenous and that the relationships are established in those spaces by the ways active users furnish and use those areas. In this way, space exists as a form of nonverbal communication. The interaction between space, furnishings, and user is shaped by cultural expectations, stereotypes, and power dynamics. I expand on the relationship

between space and communication later in this section, but first examine the ways architects and social media engineers use similar tactics to control spaces.

Architectural Determinism & Digital Spaces

Marmot (2002) defines architectural determinism³ as “the concept that building environments directly affect behaviour and attitudes” (p. 252). The concept, coined by Maurice Broady, has existed for decades before Broady had given it a name. During that time, it has been used to examine hospitals and office spaces (Pop, 2014), and college unions (Rullman & Harrington, 2014). In *Digital Proxemics*, McArthur (2016) explains this concept by using an example of a public pool where a security fence around the pool is an architectural design that causes people to enter the pool by passing through a specific entrance that was designed for access into the facility.

I have already written that social media profiles exist as both self and structure and I aim to show the ways that these spaces have been shaped by “architects” to control and impact the way we use these profiles on different social networking sites. When creating a new profile on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and SnapChat, users are required to provide their first and last names, an email address and/or phone number, and a password to access their account. Each program also uses SMS messaging or email to confirm that the user intends to create a new profile. All of these programs, except for Facebook, require specific user names as well. I liken this process to the earlier example of the public pool and gate. In the pool and profile creation scenarios, users are locked out until they complete a series of steps (profile) or an entryway

³ This concept is similar to, and sometimes used interchangeably, with *environmental determinism* and *geographic determinism*.

(pool) before they are granted access to the full benefits of the space. In addition to these steps needed to gain access to social networks, Twitter (2016) offers an option that will track your website visits and offer content that will be relevant to your immediate interests. This option is pre-selected for new users and must be turned off manually. This implicitly encourages ideal network creation and can contribute to higher levels of extremism related to these interests.

The initial process of signing up for an account is not the only example of architectural determinism in social media, though. Once inside these structures, users are still guided in ways to best use the space according to the designers. Each media encourages users to allow the program to have access to their email or cell phone contact lists. This idea incorrectly assumes users are all creating spaces for the same purpose. For example, if a user creates a new profile on these sites specifically for the purpose of researching the network, that user is still prompted to behave in specific ways, such as finding friends or creating privacy settings. Additionally, Twitter encourages users to create a network based on specific interests by offering increasingly specific choices for users to explore. Although users in this phase of creation have the option to “search for something you like...” the design indicates a hierarchy of topics that may be best enjoyed in this space. Even if this option is ignored, the aforementioned website visit feature recommends a variety of accounts related to each category in this hierarchy of topics and current location for users to follow. Like the website feature, users must manually opt out of following these accounts. A user’s choice to bypass or ignore certain segments of this process highlights a flaw in architectural determinism because the space was unable to determine the behavior. In the following sections, I examine theoretical flaws with architectural determinism and introduce opposing perspectives. I then apply these perspectives to social media profile creation and maintenance.

Architectural Possibilism

Marmot (2002) mentions the inconclusiveness of causal links between the structure and the resulting use of the space. One of the primary criticisms of architectural determinism is that it assumes humans will always behave in logical or pre-determined ways. Marmot (2002) references this assumption and adds that this concept may be too simple to account for complex human interaction with these spaces. McArthur (2016) also recognizes that architectural determinists assume spaces are active and users are passive. He opposes this assumption of passive users by sharing the concept architectural possibilism. An architectural possibilist “assumes a predetermined response is unlikely and that all physical features have an equal opportunity to affect the user experience” (Rullman & Harrington, 2014, p. 40).

Social media users are active in creating and maintaining their profiles so it is possible to view them through the lens of architectural possibilism. Users have the option of creating spoof and copycat accounts, using false names, using additional email addresses, and sharing this information with others. Individuals that utilize these tactics gain access to social media profiles, but their behaviors do not match the expectations of the “architects” that created these programs. These possibilities for users indicate that social media spaces are malleable and that individuals are able to behave in unexpected ways when faced with the same rules for access to a space.

Territories

This level of active participation in profile creation and maintenance requires further details about the previous definition of space. As indicated earlier, physical and digital spaces are perceptions, but social media users are encouraged to take ownership of these spaces. As owners of these spaces, profiles become territories. McArthur (2016) invokes Hall’s definition of territory and cites that the term suggests ownership and is characterized by an owner’s ability to

furnish and create boundaries in these spaces. I argue that social media profiles fit this definition of territory through boundary creation, design, and use of ownership language, such as “your wall” and “my friends.” I aim to demonstrate how these three characteristics fit the definition of SNS profiles as self and structure as well as argue that these options work to continuously reinforce ownership of digital space.

The first characteristic of social media profiles as territories is boundary creation. I have briefly mentioned this idea in my example of profile creation by stating that all users are required to protect their space with the use of a password. In addition to passwords, new users must verify the activity through email or SMS messages. Once users have access to their page, they are encouraged to populate their network with known individuals. They are then given the opportunity to block their profiles from public view. The Twitter Support Center (2016) provides a helpful series of changes for the users that choose to create stronger boundaries. This list reminds users that they will be unable to communicate effectively with others outside of their network, will not produce searchable content, or be able to have unapproved followers. Facebook also provides detailed instructions for users that adjust their boundaries, but mobile-driven networks such as Instagram and SnapChat provide fewer details and seem to rely on their users’ technological literacy and experience. These examples identify how boundaries are used specifically as structures to isolate networks. In the following cases, I examine how these boundaries can be linked to the ways users create ideal or multiple selves in the same profile.

Boundaries are also a useful tool for creating identities. As previously explained, services such as Facebook allow users to limit what other individuals in their network can view. For example, a person may accept a friend request from an employer, but reduce access to pictures and statuses that can be regarded as unprofessional. This boundary creation within networks

crosses multiple demographic groups as well. Several scholars have examined impression formation and management strategies among different demographics as well. Much of the existing research in this area focuses on college students in the US (Hall et al., 2014; Walther et al., 2008) and Europe (Scott, 2014; Utz, 2010), but adult American workers have been implicitly examined in academic (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2012; Frampton & Child, 2013) and journalistic (McFarland, 2012) research and adolescents (Livingstone, 2014) have been studied as well. Another study by Rosenberg and Egbert (2011) explored different methodological ways to explore this phenomenon. Their use of snowball sampling was able to collect data from a much broader population and they discovered that people that promote better and ideal selves show concern for their interaction goals. Therefore, it is important to recognize that individuals consciously recognize these boundaries as protective and impression management tools. These examples indicate that individuals choose to maintain control of their profiles and create boundaries or penalties for users that do not respect the territory.

The second characteristic of profiles as territories is the design of these spaces. I define the design of these profiles as the most prominent characteristics of the space that reinforce ownership of the territory. When these territories are populated with connections and the boundaries are set, users can furnish their territories. These furnishings may include photos, videos, biographical information, and published user activity. As mentioned in the previous point, I argue that these furnishings give users the opportunity to enact their impression management tactics while maintaining ownership of the territory. In this research, I focus on two common elements boyd and Ellison (2008) use as indicators of most SNS profile pages; (1) the Bio/About Me pages and (2) Profile photos. I argue that these factors are the most visible design elements of the territory and are inextricably linked to the less noticeable elements of the page.

The Biography, or About Me, page is the first design element I examine to illustrate SNS as territories. Users can furnish these pages with information that is relevant to their personal and interaction desires. These pages typically contain identifying information such as name, location, or birth date. This portion of the profile is also frequently viewed as an idealized self. Ellison et al. (2006) found that online daters frequently use this element of their profile to embellish elements of their physical traits and Walther et al. (2008) discovered that network connections are often skeptical of the accuracy of these self-created details. When these details, along with other identifiers such as relationship status, creative self-descriptions, location, and family information are added to profiles, users stake a unique claim to the space that is unable to be controlled by others.

The second important fixture that users add to their profile designs is the profile picture. It is necessary to point out that users can add a variety of photos to nearly any popular social media page but I focus specifically on the prominent image that is displayed on a user's timeline because it is the common image viewed when an individual is searched for, even if the user has created strict boundaries (Grasmuck et al., 2009). I choose this specific image because it is the most prominent portion of the profile design and it is a good measure of user authenticity (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Skog, 2005) and ethno-racial identity (Grasmuck et al., 2009). More recent researchers also found that this image is frequently utilized as a promotional or activist tool (Penney, 2015). For example, Penney (2015) discovered that users changed their Facebook profile pictures to a red equal sign as a persuasive tool and indicator for their support of same-sex marriage in the United States.

The final characteristic that typifies profiles as territories is the ownership language utilized by designers and users. The most obvious example of this language is the use of

possessive pronouns. For example, Facebook encourages users to post photos, links, and statuses by asking “What’s on *your*⁴ mind?” Additionally, the left panel on a user’s Facebook profile page offers an “Intro” section that urges users to describe who they are and to add additional information about their lives. The repetitive use of the possessive pronouns like “*your*” throughout these pages is a consistent reminder that the user controls the territory. With this power, they can control how they present themselves and who is allowed inside of their space.

Twitter reduces the use of these possessive pronouns but users are still encouraged to share “What’s happening?” with their followers. This language implies that the user owns the information that is being shared to their network. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram also use language that implies ownership when users adjust their boundaries. Facebook asks, “Who can see *my* stuff,” Twitter offers a “Protect *my* Tweets” option, and Instagram’s settings mentions “*your* account” and “*your* photos” in their Private Account option. Instagram and Facebook also allow users to “Share” information and photos. By definition, sharing implies that one individual owns the information and content that is being shared (Oxford, 2016).

Architectural Probabilism

I now argue that these factors of determinism, possibilism, and territories lead to the most logical concept for understanding profile creation and maintenance as spaces: architectural probabilism. Architectural probabilism “suggests that behavior is not entirely predictable and that the probability of behavior responses can be enhanced with thoughtful facility design” (Rullman & Harrington, 2014, p. 40). For example, determinists may believe that users will complete each element of their About Me page with truthful information, possibilists may argue

⁴ Emphasis added throughout this subheading.

that users will ignore these features or use inaccurate details solely because they have the opportunity to do so, and probabilists would argue that this design encourages users to only add the information they feel comfortable sharing truthfully with their network. Therefore, this space plays an important nonverbal communicative role in how users choose to disclose information. In the following section, I argue that architectural probabilism is shaped by social and cultural experiences.

In Pop's (2014) description of space, she notes that individuals' perception of space is based on a personal point of origin. Once this point is recognized, an individual gains a perception that can be compared to and against other spaces. In her critique of architectural determinism, Pop (2014) expands on this argument by expressing that a physical space is also shaped by social and cultural factors. Her focus in that critique is the physical environment, but I contend that these factors shape the types of information that people are willing to share online. For example, (Johanson, 2013) shows that many individuals have had their homes or apartments robbed and vandalized when they are willing to share their location information on Facebook. In these situations, criminals took advantage of the Facebook photos and location-based software to burglarize when they knew a resident was not at home. This resembles examples of privilege and Gerbner's Mean World Syndrome (Stossel, 1997). I argue that the ability to use mobile software and the lack of awareness to these potential dangers is correlated to higher socioeconomic status and residing in safe neighborhoods.

Another study examines age and gender in online dating networks. Sumter, Vandenbosch, and Ligtenberg (2017) examined these characteristics in young adults' use of the online dating network Tinder. They found six primary motivations for seeking interaction in the network and noted that women and older participants in the study were more likely to seek love

and use the app for easier communication. Conversely, younger men were more influenced by casual sex and easier communication. The different ways that these individuals used the space is closely connected to social expectations of marriage, stereotypes of sex and gender, risk behavior among the different genders, and diminishing interpersonal skills of the millennial generation. Therefore, these social factors contribute to the ways that people perceive and operate in this space.

This analysis of micro-level spaces concludes with a final example of cultural roles related to social media. I specifically focus on the troll subculture because it is an undeniable part of digital communication and argue that the cultural expectations of this group strengthen the idea of architectural probabilism and territory ownership in social media. As Phillips (2015) noted, anonymity is an important characteristic of trolls; however, these individuals only aim to hide their real names, locations, and contact information. Trolls still seek notoriety through the recognition of their false names and digital pranks. I contend that these individuals rely heavily on the structure the architects have created but manipulate the functions to achieve higher status in their community. Furthermore, the creation of false profiles and troll accounts forces users to recognize their ownership of these spaces. Unfortunately, this ownership may lead to negative behaviors if users deny that their true selves and assign the poor behavior to their invented personas.

Meso-Level Spaces

So far, I have examined social media profiles as individual, owned spaces that are controlled by a single user. This information is important to understanding Digital Whiteness Imperialism, but observes the concept through a very narrow lens. I now aim to expand this focus by exploring the connections between individuals and studying the interactions between

networked profiles. I maintain the focus on physical spaces by gradually increasing to a meso-level comparison. Throughout this portion of my research I focus specifically on the similarities between a person's individual network and the neighborhood unit.

Neighborhood Unit

One way to transition from the microspaces is to gradually increase the population of my comparisons. I first describe the neighborhood unit by examining Lawhon's (2009) historical critique of the neighborhood unit and its connections to the concepts of determinism, possibilism, and probabilism. The neighborhood unit is then compared to an individual's social media network. After drawing these connections, I explore the ways individuals consciously and subconsciously use these spaces to create mistrust that fosters further negative communication by focusing on Suler's (2004) Online Disinhibition Effect. I conclude my analysis of meso spaces by examining the ways that new technology creates the opportunity for this mistrust and prejudice when digital and physical spaces overlap.

Lawhon (2009) defines the neighborhood unit as the ideal residential neighborhood with defined borders and kept schools, churches, and recreational areas within a quarter mile of all residences in the neighborhood. This design has been the standard of new American neighborhoods since the 1920s. Although the idea of the neighborhood unit was meant to be convenient for residents and encourage social interaction, it was shaped by the context values (e.g. reformist ideals), manifest values (e.g. use of schools as social and cultural activities), and tacit values (e.g. socioeconomic homogeneity of the residents) of the time and led to heavily segregated communities (Lawhon, 2009). I argue that this neighborhood structure is similar to an individual's social media network through design and use.

First, it is important to recognize that the neighborhood unit and an individual's social network can be explored using the same concepts of determinism, possibilism, probabilism, and territory. In Lawhon's (2009) historical analysis of the neighborhood unit, he examined multiple arguments related to these concepts. Lawhon (2009) also notes that some scholars believe that the design of these spaces were deterministic by encouraging social interaction and similar values among residents, but others argued that this deterministic approach was too simplistic and excluded the human experience. Scholars that view the neighborhood unit from this approach insist that the design of this space only offers the opportunity interact and use space as it was initially designed (Lawhon, 2009).

This approach mirrors the design of social media networks. In the previous section, I argued that the user's profile page is created by engineers in a way that encourages specific behaviors but also ignores free will. I now aim to extend this rationale to the immediate network of a user's friends/followers. I compare this small network to a neighborhood situated in a much larger city or state the same way a personal network is positioned in a much larger digital space (e.g. Facebook or Twitter). In these digital neighborhoods, users are encouraged to socialize with those "closest" to them. Instead of measuring physical distance, I argue that closeness is measured by a combination of interpersonal distance and access to the profile

So far, I have described ways that social media users have engineered their networks to mimic the neighborhood unit. I also argue that social media designers implicitly encourage these behaviors. As previously written, the neighborhood unit was designed to make life more convenient for residents by placing social, educational, and religious institutions in close proximity of their homes (Lawhon, 2009). In many social media networks, designers use language that encourages convenience and personalization as a persuasive message to join the

network. From the login pages, Facebook emphasizes connection with friends and low financial involvement, Twitter uses popular tweets from multiple sources to highlight the ease of accessing information, and Instagram emphasizes the mobile aspect of their network to encourage constant connection. Programmers of these networks also ask for personal information and track data so the network algorithm can suggest connections, interests, and advertisements to the user (Lin & Kim, 2016). This information is used as both a business and social tool that users are unable to deny or forced to manually reset.

A second important comparison between the neighborhood unit and a social media network is the way that users utilize this space. As I mentioned, sociology scholars have differing opinions about the neighborhood unit being a deterministic space that compels neighbors to interact or if the unit was more probabilistic because residents still have free will to use the space in other ways (Lawhon, 2009). Throughout this chapter, I have examined how users control their space to restrict or allow access into their networks, but I now aim to use existing research to show the ways that these large networks are reduced to smaller neighborhoods based on digital impression management, pre-existing relationships, and shared interests.

One of the primary flaws in physical and digital neighborhood units is that it ignores human behavior, specifically individuals' desire to use impression management strategies to gain social advantages. The use of impression management strategies challenges neighborhood unit determinists' assumptions that individuals all strive for identical social lives and that they will create the strongest social connections to others that are geographically closest to them. Research indicates that individuals in physical and digital spaces use a variety of social context cues to determine who they communicate with. For example, Neu (2015) found that when college

students are unknown to each other before being assigned to group work, they use physical and nonverbal cues to choose partners. In social networks, Scott (2014) found that socially and physically attractive individuals and extroverts were viewed as being approachable. The author also recognizes that the impression management tactics used to present oneself favorably online mirror the offline effects and attitudes of others. Utz (2010) and Walther et al. (2008) also examined the roles of social connections in these spaces. Utz (2010) found that Facebook users scored higher on a scale measuring communal orientation when their friends were also extraverted. Walther et. al (2008) also found that these network connections helped create favorable and unfavorable opinions of the users. The researchers found that connections' attractiveness and the content of their messages were effective measures in determining how the individual was viewed by others outside of the network or 'neighborhood.' This content is valuable in challenging the determinists' assumptions that only proximity, socioeconomic status, and religious beliefs shape the social lives of the residents/social media users.

Another flaw in the determinist perspective of social networks and neighborhoods is the assumption that users have equal rights and access to important resources. As previously mentioned, the ideal definition of the neighborhood unit implicitly encourages segregation of diverse residents (Lawhon, 2009). Individuals of lower socioeconomic status or individuals that have been Otherized are restricted to less desirable living conditions, mistrust often develops (Ross, Mirowsky, & Pribesh, 2001). Ross et. al (2001) define mistrust as "the product of an interaction between person, and place, but the place gathers those who are susceptible and intensifies their susceptibility" (p. 569) and note that the disadvantage in these neighborhoods sets the mistrust process in motion. I argue that mistrust also exists between competing forces in these physical neighborhoods and digital networks. In the following section, I explain the online

disinhibition effect to identify factors that contribute to mistrust between individuals in digital networks. I then argue that these factors contribute to the creation of new technologies that overlap with physical spaces. I contend that this overlap leads to further Otherization of disadvantaged neighborhoods and amplifies the racial and socioeconomic segregation of residents.

Mistrust is also created by the ways individuals use these spaces. Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect looks at six interacting psychological factors that address the ways individuals use these spaces in ways that promote mistrust. The online disinhibition effect also incorporates elements of impression management such as an individual's self-disclosure strategies, interpretation of others, and communication strategies that shape social situations (Goffman, 1956). It is also imperative to note that these same factors may also lead to kind and prosocial online communication, like the ideal neighborhood unit was designed for, but I focus on the toxic elements of this concept for this study (Suler, 2004).

The first factor of the online disinhibition effect is dissociative anonymity. This concept contends that individuals feel disconnected from their digital selves. Because internet users are often semi-anonymous through the use of email addresses or screen names, they feel less vulnerable in disclosing harmful opinions or acting out. This dissociation also allows the user to maintain cognitive harmony as one can believe their internet self is different from the self they present in their real lives (Suler, 2004). Second, users are most often physically invisible from others they are communicating with digitally. This invisibility amplifies a user's willingness to behave in ways that are uncharacteristically offensive and protects the user from witnessing any emotional or physical responses that their actions have caused. The third factor of the online disinhibition effect is asynchronicity. Because most digital communication does not occur in a

continuous manner, users are not always aware of the immediate reaction to their online behaviors. They also have additional time to consider their responses or choose to ignore all others that have been offended (Suler, 2004).

The fourth factor that Suler (2004) addresses is solipsistic introjection. This mind melding occurs when physical cues are filtered out of text-based digital communication. To make sense of the interaction, users may consciously or unconsciously create characteristics for their digital companion. This mental representation is based on a combination of the impressions they have provided (e.g. language use, font color, self-disclosed information) and the user's personal expectations or needs (Suler, 2004). Fifth, is the concept of dissociative imagination. This concept relates to a psychological break between online and offline identity. Users that experience dissociative imagination feel that their online characters exist separately from their real selves and can return to their normal behaviors when they step away from their computers or smartphones. The last factor of the online disinhibition effect is the minimization of authority. Suler (2004) explains that online communication most often takes place without an authority figure present to monitor or control the interaction. Without this authority figure, face-to-face social norms are relaxed and negative behaviors are amplified (Suler, 2004). This specific factor, along with invisibility, is particularly relevant in examining impression management strategies that navigate relationships that exist online and in face-to-face contexts.

There is a perception that negative behaviors used in digital spaces are tempered in a neighborhood or physical location by factors such as authority and visibility but problems still exist in intercultural and interracial contexts. Researchers have found that interracial contact (Tropp, 2007), kin support (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004), and neighborhood stability (Ross, Reynolds, & Geis, 2000) improve interracial and intercultural interactions. Even though research

from multiple academic communities supports the need for deeper and more consistent interaction, contemporary technologies continue to segregate neighborhoods by racial and socioeconomic factors.

One example of the ways technology continues to segregate neighborhoods is related to use of technology in these spaces. For example, two White entrepreneurs developed the SketchFactor cell phone application, which uses public data and user-experience crowdsourcing to rate the safety and stability of particular neighborhoods (McEnery, 2012). SketchFactor was widely criticized and considered racist by Gawker (Biddle, 2014), *Huffington Post* (Strachan, 2014), and other media outlets, but I argue that describing a new technology as racist is too simplistic. First, much of the backlash against SketchFactor ignored the positions of the White developers. Even the most scathing review of the app *and* developers by Gawker's Sam Biddle (2014) specifically identifies "racist app," but mostly uses snide and indirect language when describing the White developers. This calls back to an earlier description of Nakayama's & Krizek's (1995) study of decentering Whiteness and Jackson II's and Moshin's (2010) use of naming. By focusing on the app's "racism" instead of the privilege of the developers, the creators of SketchFactor escape the negative media attention that was directed toward their product.

The Pokémon Go smartphone game is another new technology that shows the ways Whiteness and privilege in digital and physical spaces overlap. The app is currently available on iPhones and Android devices and is described as an "augmented reality mobile exploration game" (Chen, 2016 para. 1). The app currently boasts 20 million daily active US users, 100 million worldwide downloads, and is used for nearly 30 minutes each day (Smith, 2016). These statistics are astounding for a product that was released less than two months earlier than the time

of current writing, but these statistics do not address the way this app discriminates against some individuals and neighborhoods. Poushter (2016) shows that the United States is situated near the top of world rankings in terms of smartphone ownership but recognizes that there are important differences in ownership based on age, income, and education. Older, less educated, and less affluent Americans are less likely to benefit from this trend. Benefits may include higher profits for local businesses (Chen, 2016). Mialki (2016) notes that small businesses are able to use Pokémon Go as an effective marketing tool by turning their business into a PokeStop or Gym. This tactic, though, is likely to be much more effective in more affluent neighborhoods. Neighborhoods with residents that have received lower education and earn less household income are less likely to house a large population of smartphone users and small businesses are unable to capitalize on this trend. I argue that this use of technology implicitly encourages users to stay away from neighborhoods that can benefit most from these resources.

In this examination on meso-level spaces, I have explained the connections between social media networks and the neighborhood unit, examined some of the comparably negative ways that people behave in these physical and digital spaces, and I described two examples of the ways digital and physical spaces overlap.

Macro-Level Spaces

I now aim to move beyond neighborhoods and the digital equivalent networks into larger society and social media as a whole. I separate this portion of the research into two sections: (1) community and (2) society. I first examine community as an aggregate term that challenges traditional social and spatial boundaries and focuses on connections such as occupation, politics, or common interests. I then examine society as it relates to social and cultural norms and traditions that encompasses communities, neighborhoods, and individual beliefs. Throughout this

description, I include descriptions of various barriers and frequent negative communication behaviors that challenge positive racial, gender, and intercultural communication in society and online.

Community

I now aim to define community and justify this placement in the macro-level portion of this research. Gruzd, Jacobson, Wellman, and Mai (2016) explain that communities were initially perceived as being similar to neighborhoods. They note that these communities were localized groups of individuals that were familiar with each other and supportive of all individuals in the group. 'Community' has become a popular term to describe collections of people based on their race, sexuality, political beliefs, occupations, and other characteristics (Gruzd, Jacobson, Wellman & Mai, 2016). Examples of this include the terms, 'the Black community,' 'the LGBTQ community,' or even 'the academic community.' This characterization of community is viewed in two ways. On one hand, this idea of community is beneficial in allowing individuals to find and interact with others that they identify with. Additionally, respecting and learning from these communities may improve intercultural and interpersonal interactions. On the other hand, this description may be problematic because of its simplicity. This notion of community implies that all individuals in that specific group share the same ideals or cultural experiences. More simply, individuals that subscribe to this idea ignore intersectionality and focus on a low number of others' identifying characteristics. Furthermore, this act of naming communities reflects the aforementioned Otherizing acts described by Jackson II and Moshin (2010).

These same characteristics of community can be shared in digital spaces as well. In some ways, online spaces are actually superior to community-building. As I've previously written, internet users can search for, communicate with, and organize their social network connections

in these spaces. These spaces also allow users to bypass typical geographical challenges and remove members of the community that are not supportive to the larger group. Even with these advantages, online communities are still plagued by the same challenges of Otherizing (Zevallos, 2011). Furthermore, online anonymity also serves a dual-role in community. For example, positive communities such as addiction support groups have found success online (Dewey, 2016). Individuals in these groups are now able to find support immediately by logging into their social networks from their smartphone or computer at any time or in any place. Conversely, negative communities such as hate groups can share their information and digitally attack victims under pseudonyms and face less ramifications for their actions (Suler, 2004).

So far, I have described many of the similarities between traditional and digital descriptions of community. I now aim to identify a key difference between the two: in digital spaces, communities are more informal and often short-lived or recurring. Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman, and Himelboim (2014) identify six of these informal and short-lived digital networks. I focus on four of these networks as digital communities and now aim to provide definitions and examples of these communities. I focus on incorporating impression management strategies and limitations of less-privileged individuals in finding support in these communities as well.

The first network I examine is the polarized crowd. Smith et al. (2014) found that two primary communities emerge out of this network. In their research of this network, they found that one political hashtag led to two unique communities. Conservative users most often interacted with other conservatives and the liberal users followed a similar pattern. It is important to recognize that some individuals engaged with others outside of this impromptu community, but they were considered outliers to the study (Smith et al., 2014). These findings reflect my

earlier note that both digital and traditional community members seek support in their interactions. Furthermore, these communities disbanded shortly after the hashtag's importance diminished approximately 48 hours later.

Smith et al. (2014) then identified the tight crowd network community. The researchers characterized this type of network as highly interconnected and they stressed the importance of social support in this community. These communities are also often centered around an organized hashtag and may be short lived or recurring. Harrington (2014) found that these types of network can be identified as 'virtual loungerooms' where fans of a particular television show can gather to interact and increase their enjoyment of the program. In this example, users develop informal and impromptu communities of likeminded others to enjoy a media experience.

I intentionally note Harrington's (2014) research on virtual loungerooms for the way it bridges tight crowd communities with two other networks identified by Smith et al. (2014). These loungerooms also exist as community clusters. These clusters emerge when a topic can "ignite multiple conversations, each cultivating its own audience and community" (Smith et al., 2014, p. 3) An example of this related to the virtual loungeroom occurs when topics about a specific character, storyline, or scene emerge. This research also links tight crowds and community clusters to brand clusters. These communities emerge when mass interest is directed toward a specific topic, such as a television show or political information.

These digital communities refer to my previous explanations of impression management. As I've explained, impression management strategies exist when more than one person is involved in an interaction and is always goal-directed (Goffman, 1956). In these digital communities, individuals may be alone when crafting a message but always have an audience. The audience in these communities is often large and unknown to the message producer. In these

ways, large digital communities mirror the aforementioned acting example (Goffman, 1956). Instead of observing behaviors and reacting to an individual or small group, users in these digital settings must craft messages that will minimize the amount of unwanted attention possible. This takes planning and careful consideration of the desired goals. As I will explain later in this work, this becomes difficult as influential users utilize message characteristics that may encourage emotional contagion or cause others to RT messages because of the simplicity of the network (Ott, 2017)

Users must also take time to consider the goals they seek by participating in the community. As I've stated throughout these descriptions, support is a common goal that users desire in these spaces (Smith et al., 2014). Additionally, users may utilize these communities for media enjoyment (Harrington, 2014), political knowledge and protest (Small, 2011), mental breaks during work hours (Olmstead, Lampe, & Ellison, 2016), or even safety (Heverin & Zach, 2012). In each of these examples, social media users entered into short-term digital communities in varying levels of stress, experience, and knowledge of the other users, but found support and knowledge from the others.

Digital Community Barriers - Trolling

The next goal in this research is to identify a specific barrier to digital communities: trolling. Trolling differs from the previous examples of digital communities because trolls rely on anonymity much more than standard users. I also must note that trolling definitions and examples change intermittently as it originated online and still primarily exists in the digital environment despite attempts to redefine it in physical settings. Phillips (2015) defines a troll as an individual that disrupts digital conversations and lives by the rule that nothing should be taken seriously. Nicol (2013) adds that causing distress is another element of trolling behavior, but this

term may be misleading. It is important to recognize that some trolling behavior may be malicious and designed to distress others, but this behavior is more often inflammatory and mild than hateful. Trolling is also unique in that it is expressed through many popular digital mediums, such as text-only comments, videos, audio, and memes (Phillips, 2015).

Trolls typically act anonymously (Phillips, 2015) so impression management may not necessarily seem as important to these individuals. However, the current research on this topic provides opportunities to draw inferences about their impression management strategies. First, trolling communication also echoes a previous point that impression management is designed to create an ideal self, not the most moral or socially attractive self. It is possible that trolls value their creative and carefree qualities and uses this method as a way of accentuating these characteristics.

Phillips (2015) also implies that trolls' online personas maintain consistency in their characters. This reiterates Goffman's (1956) point of cognitive harmony for individuals. It is possible, then, to infer that even when anonymous, individuals still use impression management behaviors to achieve cognitive harmony. This point is also supported by Suler's (2004) concept of dissociative imagination. This point maintains that individuals do not need to own their online behavior because it exists separately from their real lives. By creating this compartmentalized digital self, individuals can maintain cognitive harmony in their real lives and digital lives.

Society

The goal in this segment of the dissertation is to define society and explain my purpose for including it in the current study of digital spaces. Meyer and Jepperson (2000) explain that contemporary "culture depicts society as made up of 'actors' – individuals and nation-states, together with the organizations derived from them" (p. 100). This definition is effective but, as

the authors explain, takes for granted the cultural, religious, and historical events and beliefs that contribute to the organizations made up of these modern actors. I also believe it is important to add communication to this list of societal contributions. According to Bartelson (2009), a global society also relies on communication by recognizing the importance of developing and maintaining social bonds despite cultural and historical differences. In the following descriptions, I describe some of the societal changes in communication and the ways they contribute to Digital Whiteness Imperialism.

One of the most influential early studies regarding human connectedness is Travers and Milgram's (1969) famous small world problem study that examined how many connections would be necessary for a letter to travel across the United States. In the study, Travers and Milgram (1969) asked individuals to send letters between Boston and Nebraska and measured how many people were needed to complete the chain of participants between the start and end points of the letter. This was an important study in early examinations of communication in a society where technology was changing the way individuals interacted with others outside of a small geographical location. In the following section, I highlight two of the results in this study and link them to modern digital society research.

The first result I examine is the number of intermediaries necessary to connect two individuals. In the small world problem study, Travers and Milgram (1969) found that it took approximately six connections for the letter to reach its destination. Today, digital media users can connect with their target directly through email, friend requests, follows, and private messages. I do not believe this new technology discounts the results of studying intermediaries, though. Instead I argue that this process of connecting individuals has just evolved. Today, instead of interacting with multiple connections to reach a destination, the process is streamlined

through search engines and friend networks. Despite this new technology, internet users are unable to reach their contact without some “links in the chain.” They must use search engines or personal/company websites or friends’ social networks, navigate to the correct page to find contact information, and choose the appropriate way of connecting, such as email, friend request, or private message.

It is now important to build on an understudied portion of this finding. Travers and Milgram (1969) specifically note that the number of intermediaries is consistent “even when racial crossover is introduced” (p. 442). This finding is fascinating when considering the racial tensions of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960’s (Andrews, Beyerlein, & Farnum, 2016). Many people believe that these tensions have improved since this time but, as I’ve mentioned throughout this manuscript, tension and inequality still exist despite a growing belief that Americans are living in a ‘postracial’ society (Moore & Bell, 2010). I argue that this belief in reduced or nonexistent racism travels into digital spaces as well and limits the interaction of racial groups in some ways.

The next goal of this research is to examine some of the traditional and newer ways that these tensions contribute to negative communication behaviors in society and in social networks. In this segment of the study, I aim to identify two types of harmful communication that exist in society and social networks: (1) Conventional (overt) (Klein, 2012), (2) microaggressions (covert) (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2011; Solórzano, 1998; Sue et. al 2007). These forms of harmful communication will be defined, supported by research, and discussed in terms of online and offline behaviors. These negative communication tactics are also examined through an impression management lens.

Although other scholars have narrowed their foci to specific issues and use different terms to describe unhealthy communication behaviors, I aim to broaden these subjects for the purposes of this study. I must make two noteworthy points before I define these concepts, though. First, I only address issues that directly relate to identifiable characteristics of groups or individuals. These issues are traditionally controversial and include factors such as race, religion, immigration status, or gender. A second important factor is message production and delivery. In digital communication, it is important to recognize one-to-one and one-to-many communication (Cohen, 2011). For example, a one-to-one Twitter message may be a direct message between two individuals, but the one-to-many message would be a common tweet that is distributed to all followers or all Twitter users with access to the profile. Therefore, examples of hateful communication strategies can include comments on a social media post at a micro level or webpages with the ability to reach a much larger audience at a macro level (Klein, 2012).

Traditional Negative Communication

In this dissertation, I define conventional negative communication as overt and deliberate bigotry or hatred toward a specific group of people. Sue et. al (2007) notes that overt bigotry is conscious act that is displayed publicly. Examples of these behaviors may include hostility toward women (specifically feminists) (Glick, Wilkerson, & Cuffe, 2015), support for racial profiling (Harris, 2011), civilians that protest immigration (Fox, 2014), the re-emergence of traditional hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) (Goetz, Rupasingha & Loveridge, 2012), or simply the use of slurs (Difranco, 2014). The popularity and support of these examples has ebbed and flowed in recent decades but the presence of overt racism has never been eliminated in the United States (Hanasono, Chen & Wilson, 2014; Lengel & Holdsworth, 2015).

In contemporary America, these types of extremist views play an important role in impression management. Some individuals recognize the social importance of hiding these opinions or trying to redefine them (Berbrier, 1999) to maintain positive social interactions and social support; however, other individuals take pride in these beliefs and proudly share their beliefs publicly (Jensen and Collins, 2008). At this time, it is important to remember that using impression management strategies to create an ideal self is not synonymous with creating the most moral or socially attractive self. The ideal self is simply an exaggerated version of the characteristics an individual finds most attractive (Ellison et al., 2006).

In digital environments, traditional racism takes a variety of forms. At a micro level an individual or organization may receive social media responses that include slurs against specific traits (including but not limited to race, religion, and gender). Also, traditionally bigoted comments are not socially appropriate (Jensen & Collins, 2008) and can be a source of embarrassment or reduced social support for an individual that has not disclosed these beliefs to different parts of their social network.

On a more macro level, individuals and organizations can promote conventional negative communication through popular blogs or web pages (Klein, 2012). The impression management strategies used in these scenarios can be unique as well. Klein (2012) recognizes ‘information laundering’ from hate groups and found that traditional hate groups may use mimicry as an impression management strategy to confuse web users. A website like Metapedia is a Holocaust-denial website that is designed to replicate the layout of Wikipedia (Klein, 2012). By creating websites that look functional or professional, these hate groups use familiarity as a deceptive impression management technique.

Microaggressive Communication

Microaggressive communication is a newer, and sometimes unintentional, communication strategy that is subtler and more covert than traditional racism (Sue et. al, 2007). These comments are often indirect and express a lack of respect or cultural sensitivity toward others (Sue et al., 2007). Huber and Solórzano (2015) further this definition by describing microaggressions as “the set of beliefs and/or ideologies guided by white supremacy, that justify actual or potential structural arrangements that legitimate the interests and/or positions of a dominant group or non-dominant groups” (p. 232). In daily interactions, these comments are often racial but can also be directed at individuals based on their religion, gender, or socioeconomic status. Lewis et al. (2011) examined colorblind ideology on a predominately White university and found several examples of microaggressive communication through interviews with non-White students. They found examples of students assuming Black individuals were less intelligent or from impoverished communities, Latina students were asked to speak English instead of communicating through their traditional language, and members of multiple racial and ethnic groups feeling their opinions were not respected. Solórzano (1998) also found examples of gendered microaggressions toward female graduate students who felt that their opinions were discounted because of their gender.

These examples of microaggressions do not just happen on college campuses, though; they also occur in digital settings. Huber and Solórzano (2015) examine visual microaggressions that appear in types of media ranging from children’s books to television to internet memes and video content. In their study, they specifically explore the microaggressive element of the Mexican bandit stereotype and found that Twitter was a contributing factor to spreading this message after photographs of an approved high school event that mocked immigration appeared

on the social networking site. The authors contend that these images promote offensive stereotypes and were able to be made public because of social media (Huber & Solórzano, 2015)

Gendered microaggressions are also common online. Helen Lewis brought attention to the traditional and microaggressive nature of online comments in response to articles about feminism (Geek Feminism, 2014). She coined the term Lewis's Law, which states that the offensive internet comments about feminism also justify the need for feminism.

These microaggressions contribute to impression management because they are seen as more socially acceptable types of racism (Sue et al., 2007). A microaggressive communicator may also be unaware of the problems with their language. They may believe that they are providing helpful advice or making logical assumptions instead of recognizing the meaning of their words (Lewis et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have introduced the ways individuals build personalities and networks in digital spaces. At each level of analysis, I have examined the use of positive and negative communication strategies in micro-, meso-, and macro-level spaces, but I must conclude this chapter with a final note about the aforementioned negative behaviors at the societal level. Throughout this chapter I have described the ways Whiteness has existed as a divisive tactic that contributes to many of the aforementioned concepts in this dissertation. These concepts and problems have grown online because digital spaces are less regulated than physical locations. Furthermore, the perceived lack of danger in these spaces allow internet users to spread hate, anger, or misinformation in a place where it can thrive and exist through social networks, screenshots, and saved files.

This idea of Digital Whiteness has led to this point and I aim to condense many of the arguments I have made into this final portion of this chapter. In digital spaces, Jackson II's and Moshin's (2010) argument of naming and Otherizing has led to individuals forming their own digital communities that become more extreme (Himmelboim, et. al, 2013; Sunstein, 2009) instead of being used more positively (Smith et al. 2014). These separated communities have also transitioned from digital spaces to physical locations where the digital divide and access to technology has created more inequality and mistrust in physical locations. Most importantly, all of this has occurred because negative societal conditions that have minimized the opportunities for underprivileged individuals to create safer and more diverse spaces in this new setting. Instead, these digital locations have been built, maintained, and policed by a privileged group in ways that mirror dominant cultural norms in contemporary American society.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a description of the method used in this study. It begins with a rationale for positioning this research in the critical interpretive paradigm. It then acknowledges some of the challenges in producing critical interpretive CMC research and the methodological assumptions. It then addresses my role as a researcher before posing research questions. The next goal of this chapter is to outline the qualitative content analysis method and provide a justification for this type of analysis as a useful method in critical interpretive research. Finally, I address my data collection tools and methods.

As previously stated, this dissertation aims to explore Twitter users' reactions to the Boston Marathon Bombing and subsequent manhunt and trials through a critical interpretive lens. Denzin (2010) notes that the intermingling of these, and other, paradigms (such as social scientific) is important to developing new knowledge in the current era of qualitative research. He also explains that contemporary interpretive scholarship is grounded in the belief that this style of research is universalized in the interaction of individuals and "critical qualitative inquiry fits itself to the relation between the individual and society, to the nexus of biography and society" (Denzin, 2010, p. 31). I contend that this approach is necessary to understand the relationship between individual and digital self as well as the interaction between digital selves in intercultural relationships. Furthermore, I seek to understand the way concepts such as Whiteness and privilege have shaped these digital identities and impacted intercultural interactions in digital spaces.

The critical interpretive approach is vital to addressing limitations in the current social media literature. To this point, much of the existing social media research has examined the

structure of these digital social networks and the social processes within these spaces. Fewer researchers have examined the ways users develop their online identities and the ways these identities are restricted by the assumptions within the digital spaces.

Challenges to Critical Interpretive CMC Research

Before situating the research questions within the methods for this discussion, I must first explain my goals in situating this dissertation topic among other CMC research. I first acknowledge two popular critiques of CMC and address the ways this research will produce noteworthy new content in this area. Social media has grown to be one of the most common topics among CMC researchers. Hardaker (2010) defines CMC as any interaction between humans and desktop, mobile computers, video games, and other similar tools. She goes on to explain that human-computer interaction, computer-supported cooperative work, and linguistic aggression in digital settings all comprise CMC research. Examples of CMC include social media research, methodological approaches using digital tools, and the ways people perceive digital messages. As a leading researcher in CMC, Walther (2011) has furthered this definition by establishing CMC as an integral part of interpersonal communication. He has connected these research areas by working as an early researcher of impression management and creation in CMC interactions (Walther, 1993) and addressing the role third-parties play in maintaining a consistent social media presence (Walther et al., 2008). I intend to build on this current body of literature but must work to overcome two primary challenges related to CMC research.

The first challenge I must address is the stigma of CMC research. Hardaker (2010) references this stigma by mentioning research that has described CMC as frivolous. Bodle (2013) also examines the ethics of online anonymity. The ability to remain anonymous or present multiple personas also becomes a challenge for many CMC researchers. Negativity toward

online research is also shaped by media depictions and popular opinion. Kendall (2011) noted that computer users are commonly depicted negatively as nerds and Quail (2011) notes that the nerd label is seen more positively today, but the image of a personal computer is still viewed as a less masculine item. Smith (2016) also found that the computer nerd stigma still exists. Even though Smith's (2016) results indicate that online dating has grown in popularity, some people still find it to be a sign of desperation.

The academic and public critiques of CMC is not the only challenge to the current research. I contend that the CMC research is most commonly examined through a social scientific lens (Clayton, Leshner, Almond, 2015; Kaptein, Castaneda, Fernandez, & Nass, 2014; Walther, 1993; Walther et al., 2008). The aforementioned studies are just a small sample of the much larger theme of social-scientific research in CMC. Even leading journals, such as the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* identify as social scientific publications.

As a critical interpretive researcher, I feel confident in recognizing these challenges and producing research in this growing field. I first address concerns with stereotypes and prejudice toward CMC. I contend that the functionality of email and instant messaging, as well as the recent success of social networking websites has established digital communication as a useful business and social communication strategy. Perrin (2015) indicates that 65% of American adults had social media profiles in 2015. Additionally, these networks are equally popular among men and women, almost equally popular among multiple ethnic groups, and are gaining popularity among seniors (Perrin, 2015). Social media also extends beyond American borders. Facebook boasts more than one billion active users worldwide (Lee, 2015) and Twitter receives more than one billion unique monthly visits (Twitter, 2016). Even newer social media platforms like SnapChat are believed to have more than 100 million users (McMillan & Rusli, 2014). In

addition to just owning social media profiles, Brustein (2014) notes that individuals spend a large amount of time on their social networks as well. He found that Americans spend an average of 40 minutes per day on Facebook. This surpasses the amount of time they spend responding to personal email or interacting with their pets (Brustein, 2014). This study also excludes time spent on other social networks.

The next challenge in studying CMC is the lack of critical and humanistic research methods in this body of research. Phillips (2015) and Bock (2016) have successfully used ethnographic methods to produce new CMC research. Other scholars have adapted with technology to use email (Curasi, 2001; Elmir, Schmied, Jackson, & Wilkes, 2011), instant messaging (Barratt, 2011), and Skype (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014) as useful qualitative interviewing technology to produce research across a wide variety of academic disciplines. I also argue that qualitative methods are more efficient for understanding a wide variety of topics related to social media. These topics include job opportunities (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014; McFarland, 2012), romantic relationships (Ellison et al., 2006), charitable donations and activist causes (Kristofferson, White, & Pelozo, 2014), addiction support (Dewey, 2016), and social status (Scott, 2014). I believe that Digital Whiteness Imperialism impacts each of these subjects and will inspire future critical interpretive research in CMC.

Qualitative Big Data Research

This dissertation also fits into the growing body of literature related to Big Data research. Throughout this portion of the methodology chapter, I examine contemporary definitions of big data research and raise awareness of scholarly issues with this topic. I then continue to address challenges of critical and interpretive qualitative methods in big data CMC studies.

Jin, Wah, Cheng, and Wang (2015) note that a universal definition of big data is not agreed upon within the scientific community, but argue that it “can be regarded as a bond that subtly connects and integrates the physical world, the human society, and cyberspace” (p. 59). These authors also note that big data will be an important factor in economic growth and has already changed the ways researchers think about and produce research. Shahin (2016) notes that ethical, epistemological, and methodological problems exist within this new field, though. He explains that some scholars question the rhetoric of objectivity in big data studies, the reliability of big data archiving, and user privacy. I aim to address these concerns as well as contend that critical and qualitative methods are useful in big data CMC research.

First, it is important to recognize that critical and interpretive researchers are subjective. These studies focus on the researcher as instrument, inductive theory development, and “preserve the subjective experience of social actors in explaining how their performances are meaningful” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, p. 9). The concern that big data research is not objective stems from a positivist assumption of big data research that is not applicable to the current study. Next, Shahin (2016) mentions issues with saving and archiving big data as well as privacy concerns. I address these issues in greater depth later in this chapter, but will provide a brief overview of these concerns here. First, the Tweet Archivist and NVivo tools that I describe later in this chapter were used for data collection and coding. Tweet Archivist maintains a record of my collected data on their website. This data has also been downloaded and saved to more reliable data storage devices. The NVivo coding data contains the same Twitter data and was saved to additional storage devices as well. Privacy is also a serious ethical concern. The data that was collected for this project was all publicly available at the time of collection. The tweet Archivist collection tool is unable to bypass a user’s privacy settings; therefore, protected content was not

included in the work. Furthermore, the semi-anonymous environment of Twitter with the use of false names, user IDs, and inaccurate profile images all exist to further protect users that wish to maintain their anonymity even with publicly available data.

Methodological Assumptions

It is vital to address assumptions and ‘methodological currents of thought’ related to critical interpretive research, especially in digital settings. One of the primary assumptions of critical and interpretive research is the inductive approach to theory creation and development (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Like other critical and interpretive work, the current research follows this tradition. In addition to this approach to theory-building, it is important to recognize currents of thought such as case studies, ethnography, participant observation, phenomenology, grounded theory, life history, historical method, action and applied research, and critical research (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

It is also important to recognize that qualitative approaches to online research are still debated in terms of ethics, proxemics, (a)synchronicity, and anonymity (Suler, 2004). However, because the internet is a socially-constructed space, it is still a fruitful site of research (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Throughout this chapter, I aim to address these concerns and provide explanations for my methodological approaches and digital data-gathering tools.

Research Questions

As indicated in chapter one of this dissertation, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

RQ1: In what ways do Twitter users utilize various message creation tactics to advance Digital Whiteness Imperialism?

RQ1a: How do media organizations utilize Twitter to maintain or advance Digital Whiteness Imperialism?

RQ1b: How do media personalities utilize Twitter to maintain or advance Digital Whiteness Imperialism?

RQ1c: How do individuals utilize Twitter to maintain or advance Digital Whiteness Imperialism?

RQ1d: How do individuals utilize Twitter to resist the status quo of the Twitter environment?

RQ2: How do users utilize Twitter to create harmful content from their personal accounts?

RQ2a: How do users challenge harmful content?

RQ3: How do users utilize Twitter to create empathetic content from their personal accounts?

RQ3a: How do users utilize Twitter to create diverse content from their personal accounts?

Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a versatile research method that is situated in the interpretivist paradigm (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), which “has its origins in Max Weber’s *verstehende sociology*” (Humphrey, 2011, p.7). In the interpretivist paradigm, scholars have a broad goal of understanding social meanings based on a specific culture’s beliefs and values (Roth & Mehta, 2002) and often recognize the human-communication relationship as reciprocal instead of causal (Martin & Nakayama, 2013). Researchers in this paradigm also use the aforementioned interview method regularly.

Spencer, Ritchie, and O'Connor (2003) define this method as a process of data collection that focuses on the content and context of documents. With this method, "themes are identified, with the researcher focusing on the way the theme is treated or presented and the frequency of its occurrence" (p. 200). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) also note that there are three approaches to qualitative content analysis that use different "coding schemes, origins of codes, and threats to trustworthiness" (p. 1277) but all adhere to the interpretivist paradigm. The three approaches are conventional, directive, and summative (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I examine the appropriate research studies that each of these approaches lend themselves to and report on some of each method's shortcomings in the following paragraphs. Later in this chapter, I critically examine the broader advantages and disadvantages of qualitative content analysis at a more general level.

The conventional approach is a popular among many scholars and is often used when existing theories and literature about a topic is inadequate (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Researchers using this approach also allow categories to emerge naturally from the data instead of using existing themes. Researchers (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) also recognize an important shortcoming of this approach. They note that scholars who fail to develop adequate understandings of the context and categories struggle to accurately represent data.

Researchers approaching this method from a directed perspective are more open to using a group of pre-existing codes that they intend to apply to their data. New codes can be developed from data that does not fit into an initial category, though (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach is appropriate if the researcher is examining specific aspects of a phenomenon or don't believe the initial categories will create bias of the text. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) contend that this approach is a challenge to the interpretivist paradigm because the directed approach is often used to expand on existing theory and this tactic often creates an informed bias of the researcher.

The purpose of the summative approach to qualitative content analysis is “identifying and quantifying certain words or content in text with the purpose of understanding the contextual use of the words or content” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1283). This approach applies itself to latent content analysis that focuses on understanding the underlying meaning of the data. This approach does not challenge the interpretivist paradigm the way the previous example of the directed approach does, but Hsieh and Shannon (2005) criticize it for other reasons. They note that summative analysis often ignores broader themes and issues and may be less trustworthy than other methods.

Qualitative Content Analysis Assumptions

Qualitative content analysis, particularly from the conventional and summative approaches share many of the same aforementioned assumptions as qualitative interviewing, such as an inductive approach to generating theory (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). In this section, I recognize the overlap between these methodological assumptions but aim to identify more assumptions that are more relevant to content analysis.

As previously written, knowledge claims developed through content analysis are positioned and partial (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Since much of the findings discovered with this method avoid pre-existing categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), researchers develop their own themes and must reflect on the validity of their findings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Calafell (2013) stresses the importance of this reflexivity and notes the importance of acknowledging the privileges and biases in our work. Although information emerges more naturally, it is more difficult for researchers to validate their results.

A second assumption of qualitative content analysis is that the aforementioned partial knowledge claims are generated through “prolonged immersion in their data (Hsieh & Shannon,

2005). By immersing themselves in their data, researchers earn a deeper understanding of social realities and “illuminate how humans use cultural symbol systems to create shared meanings for their existence and activity” (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 16). As mentioned in the description of the summative approach to content analysis, part of content analysis is to examine the underlying meanings in the data and this is achieved more clearly through a researcher’s deep understanding of their data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

How Researchers Have Used This Method

Researchers have used content analysis in numerous contexts, but I narrow the focus to qualitative studies that examine digital topics, particularly social media. One interesting study paired qualitative analysis and interviewing to explore online dating profiles. Manning (2014) also used values coding in this study as a way of interpreting the attitudes, values, and beliefs of research participants. To conduct this study, Manning (2014) interviewed 30 individuals that shared their online dating profiles with him before the scheduled interview. Participants were asked about various items that they disclosed in their profiles and then values coding was applied to the interviews and profiles separately. With this method, Manning (2014) discovered that many individuals shared different attitudes, beliefs, and values in their interviews that differed from their profiles. Three reasons for these differences include avoiding the appearance of shallowness, feeling embarrassed about some parts of their profile, and wanting to appear competent in ways of engaging relationships (Manning, 2014).

Sanderson and Browning (2013) also conducted a qualitative analysis of interview data. In this study, the authors interviewed collegiate student-athletes and conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts. This type of analysis is a common content analysis method that involves a deep immersion into the data and subsequently separating the material into different

categories (themes) before contextualizing the findings into existing literature (University of Auckland, 2015). Three categories of (1) (non)training, (2) surveillance/monitoring, and (3) reactive training emerged. Most importantly, Sanderson and Browning (2013) found a common thread of all three categories that indicates that the specific collegiate athletic department primarily monitored student media posts only after a negative incident occurred.

Method Strengths

I have previously explained that one of the primary advantages of content analysis is its versatility in being able to be used quantitatively or qualitatively. For the purposes of this assignment, I focus only on the strengths of qualitative content analysis, although many of these benefits are shared in both methodologies. Berger (2011) lists several advantages of this method that include being unobtrusive, inexpensive, appropriate for current events, used with easily attainable material, and yields quantifiable data. In the following paragraphs, I examine several of these advantages that I consider most relevant to my research.

One of the primary benefits of this method is that it is very unobtrusive (Berger, 2011). Once data is collected by the researcher(s), there is no reason to intrude on the research participants. Another benefit of unobtrusive research is the effect it has on participants. Research dating back to the Milgram experiment (1963) indicates that participants act in unnatural ways when a researcher is observing them. Therefore, studies involving this method are freer of outside influence.

Another advantage of qualitative content analysis is time sensitivity. Unlike time sensitive topics and methods such as political polling and case-specific observation, content analysis can often be done at any time (Trochim, 2006). Content analysis is also an effective method for conducting trend studies by analyzing data over long periods of time (Berger, 2011).

Content analysis also works well with other research methods. For example, researchers may conduct a series of recorded interviews with their participants. They can later transcribe the interview, code this data, and create themes from the coded material. This has been done in studies such as Sanderson and Browning (2013) and Manning (2014).

An important advantage of qualitative content analysis considered in this dissertation is how it can be used in digital studies. Third-party applications such as Storify, Tweet Archivist, and Tag Sleuth collect messages, images, posts, and links from a variety of social networking websites that include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more. These tools are generally inexpensive, improved and updated frequently, and make data collection and organization much simpler for researchers. These tools also afford scholars the opportunity to examine new phenomena that would have been nearly impossible a short time ago. These digital data collection tools are vital to the growing field of big data media research.

Method Weaknesses

Berger (2011) also lists a series of disadvantages for scholars using qualitative content analysis. As I have done in the previous section, I now list these disadvantages and further explain several particular difficulties as they relate to my own research. Berger (2011) notes that this method makes it difficult for researchers to find a representative sample, establish measurable data, obtain coder reliability, operationalize important terms, and ensure validity of the results.

Establishing coder reliability and valid results in qualitative analyses of text-based digital research is a serious problem in social media studies. The primary reason for this difficulty relates to a researcher's inability to accurately interpret the meaning of text. Although acronyms (ex. LOL, JK, IKR), emoticons (ex. =), =(, =/), and the increase in graphic images that indicate a

user's emotion, called emojis, contribute to increased clarity between participants in digital communication, the absence of physical cues, vocal tones, and environmental context leaves room for errors in judgment and interpretation.

Similar to quantitative content analysis, this procedure is not an effective method for discovering causal relationships (Berger, 2011). This is not a surprising finding in qualitative research, especially with methods that emerge from the interpretive paradigm, but is an important clarification because of this method's versatility in quantitative and qualitative research.

Another disadvantage of this method is time consumption although not all researchers agree on this (Trochim, 2006). In the previous section I argued that this is not a time sensitive method and is useful for examining trends; however, collecting data, reducing data to a suitable quantity, coding data, and establishing themes takes a substantial amount of time and effort. This process can be more time consuming or financially expensive if data needs to be transcribed by the research team or a hired professional. As previously mentioned, the interpretation of data and challenge of ensuring coder reliability is particularly difficult in text-based digital communication and may increase the time it takes for researchers to agree on a set of themes or conclusion in their studies.

Data Collection

Twitter data related to the Boston Marathon Bombing was collected and stored through various third-party applications such as Tweet Archivist and NVivo. In a previous study (Brojakowski, 2016), I specifically examined offensive tweets that were highlighted by the @YesYoureRacist Twitter account. In that study, 224 tweets from 150 users were collected from April 15, 2013 and April 19, 2013. This number was later reduced to 92 users for the purposes of

the research. Also, the collection dates reflect the day of the attack until the day of Tsarnaev's capture by Boston police. All tweets were collected and stored using Storify, a free third-party application (Storify, 2016). The folder containing these tweets was then published as a public folder for Storify users.

After this initial study, I discovered a new application that can be used for more comprehensive data collection and storage called Tweet Archivist. Tweet Archivist is a paid subscription tool that collects and organizes tweets containing specific hashtags and terms on Twitter (Tweet Archivist, 2016). This program collects all public tweets containing hashtags or search terms chosen by the researcher. Tweet Archivist also generates analytic data by providing "ten visualizations based on each archive of tweets, providing valuable insight into trends and behaviors" (Tweet Archivist, 2016, para. 2). I collected data for the hashtag #BostonBombing to be used in this study. The collection start time was chosen to reflect the time it was most popular as a Twitter trending topic (April 8, 2015). The data collection period ended on October 10, 2015 and produced nearly 27,000 tweets and over 581 million Twitter Impressions. After collecting this data, Tweet Archivist's Volume Over Time function showed that the #BostonBombing hashtag trend was only popular for approximately 48 hours after the trend began. Therefore, the data set was reduced to reflect this timeframe of April 8-9, 2015. Furthermore, the data set was then edited to remove any non-English tweets. This left a total of 12,356 tweets to be used as a final dataset for this study. In addition to the text content of the message, accompanying information such as user name, time codes, hashtags, media links, images, and user mentions were also collected as part of this dataset.

It is important to note that other terms and hashtags were not chosen despite the opportunity to retrieve additional data. First, this hashtag was chosen because it was a United

States national trending topic. This indicates that it was one of the most popular and most used terms during the data collection period. Second, the amount of data retrieved is much greater than what is commonly used in qualitative, or critical big data research studies. Third, other data was collected but later omitted. For example, the name ‘Dzhokhar Tsarnaev’ also trended during that time and data was collected for that term. After editing this data to fit the language and time constraints of the #BostonBombing hashtag, it became clear that thousands of tweets were identical due to the terms “Dzhokhar Tsarnaev” and “#BostonBombing” being used together in multiple messages. Therefore, the Dzhokhar Tsarnaev data was removed to avoid unnecessary repetition within the data set. Finally, I did not choose to search for similar terms based on misspellings or shortened terms. It is not possible to predict which misspellings were most common (ex. #BostoonBombing or #BosBombing) and none of these shortened tags or typographical errors were popular enough to draw national attention at the time.

Coding

Coding was done with the NVivo Qualitative data analysis program. This is a downloadable program created by QSR International. The Tweet Archivist data was entered into NVivo with minor changes, such as eliminating a secondary time code and arranging tweets alphabetically instead of chronologically. All changes were made solely because of complications between the programs and did not reduce the size of my data set or eliminate valuable coding data. The data entered into NVivo included the User Name, Universal Time, Tweet, Language, Location, Hashtags, URLs, User Mentions, Media, Follower Account, and Name. The Twitter ID, Local Time, Profile Image Link, Tweet Source, Time Zone, and Geo data were all removed for the purposes of the study. Additionally, the excluded data was not necessary for the study. For example, all tweets were collected using the universal time code,

therefore, a second time code was redundant and could have led to confusion in the analysis. Another example of excluded data was the Geo tag. This category produced very little data when it was collected by Tweet Archivist because many Twitter users do not manually turn on this function. This category was, therefore, unrelated to the needs of this research and did not produce enough data that would lead to meaningful results.

In this study, tweet content, hashtags, and URLs were all labeled as Codable Data and all other categories were labeled as Classifying Data according to the options available with NVivo. Coding the data in this way allowed me to focus on the content of the tweets and any attached hashtags, media, and popular users. One potential issue that arose during this coding process was the classification of media, particularly images and GIFs, that were included in tweets. I found this media to be highly important, but chose to include the media file in the Codable Data category. This decision was made because links to this material were already collected in the tweet content code. Inclusion of these media file names would have been redundant and created unnecessary data in this study.

Thematic Analysis

This dissertation employs thematic analysis of tweets, hashtags, and Twitter users to identify popular themes and ways of utilizing Twitter to provide information, interact, or share content during the data collection time. Thematic analysis is a popular and effective qualitative analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and a discreet way of coding existing data (Berger, 2011). It is also appropriate for meeting the goals of this essay. One challenge that arises with this method is the lack of clear definition of the method; however, Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that it is used for analyzing and explaining patterns, or themes, in a data set. The authors also list six steps for conducting thematic analysis. They include (1) familiarizing oneself with

the data, (2) identifying initial codes, (3) discovering themes, (4) reviewing the material in each theme, (5) naming and identifying criteria for each theme, and (6) writing a report to display the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is also an effective coding method for social media studies because data, specifically tweets, is often composed of text and visual components. With thematic analysis, I can use all parts of the tweets, including links to outside articles to gain a deeper understanding of the users' communication and impression management goals.

In the following chapter, I identify these initial codes and explain the criteria that needed to be met for data to be coded correctly. I add one additional step to Braun and Clarke's (2006) description, though. After my description of initial codes and criteria I provide a condensed literature review about the topic. After these short reviews, I follow the traditional approach to thematic analysis that was listed earlier in this chapter. In this section, I name broad themes and describe the ways that Twitter users created unique and RTed messages that fit into these broad themes.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This chapter identifies several of the themes discovered through the textual analysis of the corpus. I provided information from existing literature related to each theme as well as multiple examples of tweets that support each theme. Each example references a specific tweet and includes all spelling or grammar errors, inconsistencies in upper and lower case letters, and the Twitter handles of individuals that were tagged in the content of the message. If the tweet contained any emojis or images that were unable to be included in this work, a description of these images and my interpretation of their meanings are included in the analysis. Finally, some terms and categories were consistent across multiple themes. For example, ‘death’ was consistently used in different ways. Many individuals tweeted hateful messages wishing death upon Tsarnaev, some individuals tweeted that the death penalty was an option in an informative context, and others wished for more peaceful consequences and used Twitter to challenge the death penalty. Further analysis of these examples is provided later in this chapter. Throughout this chapter, I aim to provide comprehensive descriptions of each theme that include all perspectives.

Before I begin to describe the primary themes found in this study, I must provide a short explanation for some of the content that was excluded from the work. I also examine messages that subvert the most popular interpretations of the #BostonBombing hashtag. These are important because they are either unrelated to the #BostonBombing hashtag or were used in an attempt to draw attention to other issues. In sum, 36,531 references (tweets, hashtags, and links) were collected for this study and only 1,956 references fit into the unused and subversive categories. These categories account for only 5% of the total corpus.

Considerations and Challenges with the Data Set

Language Filter

A small challenge with this data was an issue with Tweet Archivist's language settings. As previously mentioned, the data collected by Tweet Archivist was edited to include all English language content. Unfortunately, a small number of messages containing non-English content were not removed by the language filter. These tweets often contained some English content, but all were excluded from the study. Examples of tweets include messages such as "Count 31 guilty por perro. #Bostonbombing" and "Morte tramite Camel Clutch. Fagliela, Shiek. RT @the_ironsheik: TSARNAEV I HOPE YOU F*CKING DIE YOU FUCKING JABRONBI #BOSTONBOMBING." These messages indicate that some content was tweeted using multiple languages and others were responses to English language tweets.

Content Unable to be Deciphered

Another collection of messages that were not included in this study were messages that could not be classified into specific categories for a variety of reasons. This category of data includes tweets that lacked context, included symbols that were unable to be deciphered by the Tweet Archivist data collection tool, or were interactions with a user that had deleted a message or could have been using a privacy filter. Other messages were incomplete for various reasons. These messages could have been cut off by Tweet Archivist or they could have been part of a longer message thread, but only the threaded tweet(s) containing the #BostonBombing hashtag were included in the results. Several of these messages were RTed and many of these tweets came from public figures such as the television host Montel Williams. In each of these scenarios, the messages that were unable to be interpreted accurately and were excluded from the dissertation.

Subversive Tweets

Before I begin to describe the themes and categories that I discovered in this research, it is important to note that some tweets containing the #BostonBombing hashtag contained links and content unrelated to the 2013 Marathon bombing or were attempts to subvert the intended meaning of the hashtag. These tweets were categorized as subversive and occupied an interesting space in this study. These tweets provided insight into the way some individuals and organizations use hashtags. For example, the most common use of this subversive content is from www.conservativereport.org. Many tweets follow an identical pattern of using hashtagged terms associated with Christian and right-wing beliefs along with emojis and links to blog posts on www.conservativereport.org. This website is no longer functional and was likely used as a spam blog designed to collect data for advertisers before linking to unaffiliated websites (WPBeginner, 2017). An example of these messages is “Generals Sacked, #Benghazi Bites B <http://t.co/ZjzFa9E1G7>

#1A♣#BostonBombing♣#WMD▶#ProLife♥#ProtectSociety♣#Death◀#sot #foxnews #tcot #cnn”

Another example of subversive content was used by individuals for self-promotion. Some individuals used #BostonBombing to link to their media or event. This was done to make their content more visible to a larger audience by linking it to a popular trending topic. An example is “Listen to Bamboo by the lebanese-french artist #LeaMakhoul <http://t.co/OVSAIVqny4> #BostonBombing.” These messages were often used with a series of other hashtags, likely trending at the time of message creation, to increase visibility of their content across multiple interest groups and topics.

One of the more interesting ways of subverting the #BostonBombing hashtag was to attach another issue to it. This practice, commonly referred to as hashtag hijacking, is defined as “the art of using a defined Twitter hashtag for the opposite purpose than what was originally intended by the author or creator” (Hashtags, 2013 para. 6). Some characteristics of hijacked hashtags include subversion (Twitter, 2013), grassroots activism (Crystal, 2012), spontaneity (Jackson & Welles, 2017), and attention-seeking behavior (Campbell, 2013). These characteristics were all noticeable in tweets related to the death of Walter Scott.

Walter Scott was an unarmed Black male that was shot and killed by officer Michael T. Slager in Charleston, South Carolina (Blinder, 2017). The incident occurred on April 4, 2015, roughly three weeks before the Tsarnaev sentencing. At the time the #BostonBombing data was collected, this event was timely, topical, and viewed as a model for the differences between the way citizens and police were treated by the media and society. Individuals tweeted several messages including the name or hashtag for Walter Scott as a way of drawing attention toward an issue of injustice. Examples of commonly retweeted messages related to Walter Scott include “Sure hope #WalterScott’s family gets the same justice as the family of the #BostonBombing victims” and “Justice must be served #WalterScott #BostonBombing.” These messages are interesting because they do not dismiss the importance of Tsarnaev’s trial or the perceived justice for the victims’ families. Other tweets showed frustration about Tsarnaev’s trial and the lack of attention to the Scott shooting. These tweets included “The cop ALLEGEDLY killed #WalterScott but they hype AF about the #Boston Bombing...all over it#GuiltyBeforeProvenInnocent” and “DOES NO ONE SEE THIS?!? #Terrorist has a day in court and gets a chance at justice...a BLACK MAN DOESNT #BostonBombing

#BlackLivesMatter.” It is clear in each of these messages that users attaching Walter Scott to the Tsarnaev trial are following the aforementioned characteristics of hashtag hijacking.

Informative Content & Media

The *Informative* and *Informative RT* themes produced the largest amount of results. These themes produced 10,571 references that were included in the data. This makes up for nearly 30% of the total data. This is not surprising as Ferrara and Yang (2015) note that most users adopt Twitter for information-sharing. In this section of the dissertation, I provide a brief analysis of Twitter as a useful information-sharing network and journalistic tool. I also identify and describe several of the key themes and the users that provided the most references in this section. First, I want to address the criteria for being coded as informative. Tweets in this theme were coded as informative if the message contained factual or objective material in the text of the tweet. For example, a tweet reading “Tsarnaev found guilty on 30 counts” would be coded in this theme. Additionally, the language used in these tweets had to be neutral and not intend to Otherize Tsarnaev. These messages often referred to him by full name, last name, common name (Jahar), or as the defendant. Descriptions such as “terrorist” or other attempts at Otherizing Tsarnaev were coded in a separate theme that is described later in this chapter. Finally, many informative tweets used links and media.

The informative themes are intimately connected to media as many of the tweets categorized as informative stemmed from major media accounts. This is important to note because many Twitter users interact with media organizations as if they were involved in an interpersonal relationship (Meyer, Marchionni & Thorson, 2010). These users also often RTed messages that linked to articles, videos, and blog posts as ways of sharing information with their networks. Media served other purposes as well, though. Many individuals and news

organizations used the #BostonBombing hashtag to promote their own programming or blogs. Others used Twitter to criticize media outlets that covered the trial in ways that they did not support. In this section, I also examine these media characteristics in greater detail. I then describe multiple themes related to media promotion and criticism within the #BostonBombing hashtag.

The informative and media themes are very interesting as recent statistics related to online news sources indicate that many adults favor social media for finding news. Although it still ranks behind televised news, the internet is rapidly growing as a news source for adults (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016). Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, and Shearer (2016) found that 38% of adults often receive their news from social media, websites, and smartphone apps. These researchers also found that 66% of adults use both mobile and desktop/laptop devices to find news. Interestingly, Mitchell et al (2016) also found that nearly two-thirds of adults also find news from their friends and family reliable.

Likability & The Status Quo

These findings are important because they emphasize an important factor of how individuals consume news: likability. Meyer, Marchionni, and Thorson (2010) note that people treat media as if it was human. Because they interact with media as if they had an interpersonal connection, it is important that their media be likeable. These researchers explain that individuals seek a balance between themselves, the other (i.e. media), and the message (Meyer, Marchionni & Thorson, 2010). When a harmonious balance is reached, individuals form stronger connections to the media. As previously written throughout this dissertation, Twitter is an ideal tool for finding agreeable content and maintaining pre-existing interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, Twitter users are implicitly encouraged to maintain ideal networks instead of seeking out diverse content.

It is interesting to acknowledge that users maintain ideal networks because Twitter should be the perfect tool for encouraging journalistic diversity. Carpenter (2010) notes that content diversity is often measured by differences in amount or types of topics, outbound hyperlinks, and interactive and multimedia tools. Furthermore, Carpenter (2010) writes that diverse content from traditional and non-traditional sources exposes individuals to more information and holds mainstream media accountable for their coverage of specific events. Harcup (2016) also explains that forms of alternative and citizen journalism are easier to produce in digital networks and can improve transparency in local political institutions. By ignoring or dismissing this content for more likeable and traditional sources, individuals limit their own knowledge of diverse topics. Furthermore, these traditional sources often aim to maintain the status quo and are targeted at elite White consumers (Carpenter, 2010).

Users may also avoid diverse content because they fear interaction. Yun and Park (2011) have examined spiral of silence theory in digital networks and note that people feel more comfortable expressing their opinions about a topic when they perceive their opinion will be received favorably. They found that users were more willing to share their beliefs online if they felt their opinion was favorable in that forum, but were less concerned with the beliefs of others that were offline or outside of the forum/network (Yun & Park, 2011). This supports the point that users are more willing to follow and interact with likeable media that supports their opinions.

Yun and Park (2011) also mentioned a second important characteristic of interacting in online forums. They note that fear of appearing ignorant or uneducated may be an underlying

motivation for an individual's unwillingness to interact in the forum. I contend that the RT feature on Twitter eases this stress. A RTed message occupies an interesting space in social media research because a RTed message may contribute to the dissociative anonymity described in chapter two of this study. When a Twitter user RTs a message, their user name is lightened and reduced to a smaller font which becomes more difficult to view while scrolling through a timeline. Furthermore, the user's profile image is removed and replaced by the image of the account being RTed. I argue that this supports Suler's (2004) assertion that internet users relieve themselves of responsibility or consequences when presenting themselves in an unfavorable way online. Conversely, Kim and Song (2016) note that retweeting is found to have a positive impact on social presence. Therefore, an individual may feel less responsibility for RTing a message, but may feel positively about their own unique tweets being RTed.

In addition to diminishing their own involvement in sharing informative content, Twitter users that RT messages may also confuse or overwhelm readers in their networks. Carpenter (2010) notes that excessive interactivity and multimedia may frustrate or inhibit the memory of individuals. When an individual RTs messages, their followers must take the time to examine the message, judge the original producer of the content, view media or outbound links, and assess the relationship between message producer and the RTER. As Carpenter (2010) notes, this can be an overwhelming process. It also creates confusion about the roles of the producer and RTER. This confusion further weakens a user's role in sharing information.

Opinion Leaders

Thus far, I have examined the ways that RTs may reduce the role of specific individuals in sharing content, but I now aim to focus on how these messages identify the accounts that hold the most power and influence in terms of content, followers, and RTs. As previously written,

users may RT a message due to fear of isolation or fear of appearing ignorant, but I have not focused on which individuals or media networks are most often RTed. These RTed individuals and networks hold more power in the network as they began to be RTed on timelines of non-followers and pushed to the top of trending topic pages. In this section of this dissertation, I examine how these influencers shape the perception of the story related to the Boston Marathon Bombing.

CNN. The largest opinion leader in this data set is CNN. Several CNN Twitter accounts, such as @CNN, @cnnbrk, and others were included in 5,755 references of more than 10,000 coded references. One reason for CNN's influence in this category was the amount of tweets their different accounts produced. Different CNN Twitter accounts kept a growing count of the charges against Tsarnaev. They also RTed other CNN accounts and the accounts of different CNN personalities. Each of their tweets produced some information such as "17 of 17 counts... guilty," but much of this informative content was immediately followed by a link to an article, video, or livestream of their news coverage. This strategy created a web-like structure of information and media that was intended to keep followers up-to-date of every detail.

Additionally, several media outlets tweeted memorials to the four victims that were killed during the Boston Marathon Bombing, but none were as popular as CNN. CNN remained the top influencer for sharing content that was used as a digital memorial to the four victims. A tweet by @cnnbrk (CNN Breaking News) reading "Remembering the victims. #BostonBombing <http://t.co/2Naf2gWzvT> <http://t.co/uQ4ak5Qc6u>" was RTed more than 600 times. One of those RTers was actress Holly Robinson Peete who was then RTed a dozen times. I use this example to show that CNN's influence as well as the influence of celebrities and public figures. Peete's RT

shows that even individuals who may not follow CNN can find this content and share it within their own networks.

Michelle Malkin. A very different type of opinion leader was media personality Michelle Malkin. According to her personal website, Malkin is “a mother, wife, blogger, conservative syndicated columnist, and author.” (Malkin, 2017, para. 1). She lists the titles of all six of her published works and notes that she remains an “ink-stained wretch” (Malkin, 2017, para. 13) that began her career in newspaper journalism before she gained notoriety for her online presence. As of May 2017, she has slightly more than two million Twitter followers and has tweeted almost 62,000 messages. During the data collection period of Tsarnaev’s sentencing, she led a targeted attack against Rolling Stone magazine and her messages were spread throughout Twitter by hundreds of RTs from her followers.

In July 2013, *Rolling Stone* magazine ran a story about Tsarnaev and placed an image of him on the cover of that issue. This was not well-received by many individuals and several stores refused to carry that issue and others boycotted the sale of future issues (Berman, 2013; Cohen, 2013). Malkin was particularly offended by the magazine and led an antagonistic digital attack against them nearly two years later when Tsarnaev was found guilty. During the data collection period, examples of Malkin’s tweets include “Silence from @rollingstone on #bostonbombing,” “We see you @rollingstone – how long will you ignore #bostonbombing verdict ? Shame on you <http://t.co/bbR3XAIEgZ>,” “Hi @rollingstone Tsarnaev GUILTY on all 30 counts. Now faces death penalty. How about retweet for #bostonbombing victims,” and “Just obtained official @rollingstone response to cover boy Jahar’s 30-count guilty verdict in #bostonbombing.” The final message included a YouTube link to the sounds of crickets chirping. This indicated that Rolling Stone had not commented on the results of the sentencing.

It is important to note that Michelle Malkin was not the only individual to be critical of Rolling Stone's Tsarnaev coverage. Twitter users @ChuckCJohnson and @hale_razor were also RTed often. I note that @ChuckCJohnson is a White male and @hale_razor's profile photo is a cartoon image of a White man. This further emphasizes that White men, or perceived White men, also hold a position of power and influence in digital spaces. This shared opinion with a largely White, male crowd is important to note as Malkin was the only woman not involved in the 2013 attack to be supported in all of the #BostonBombing tweets. It is also important to note that other individuals also directed comments toward Rolling Stone, but none were as influential as Malkin, who was referenced more than 1,700 times.

Media Response to Terror Attacks

In addition to just RTing content, it is important to understand what type of content is being shared. The media response to terrorist attacks is an important starting point for understanding media culture. It also applies to the ways people perceive, like, and interact with media. Gerhards and Schäfer (2013) conducted a content analysis of international television outlets responses to worldwide terror attacks. Their study found that CNN (United States), Al-Jazeera (Arabic), BBC (United Kingdom), and ARD (Germany) dedicated similar amounts of air time to the events, all condemn the attacks, the innocence of victims is highlighted, and each organization juxtaposes the common events of the day before the attack with the pain and grief that follows it. Interestingly, the authors found that CNN and Al-Jazeera share additional characteristics such as warlike vocabulary and a stronger focus on consequences and reactions of the event instead of military implications or domestic investigations (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2013).

This study is important because it provides insight about the way news media, specifically CNN in the United States, presents information about terror attacks. This work is not

comprehensive of today's media market, though. This focus on cable news networks ignores print media, local media, social media, and independent media. It also excludes the ways these organizations use social media to spread information and attract viewers and readers. Finally, this study does not recognize independent media personalities and on-air reporters that may use personal social media accounts in ways that are undesirable or inconsistent with the impression the network aims to present. I now aim to provide more in-depth analysis and examples of tweets that describe the ways media accounts use Twitter to cover the trial and related stories.

Media Promotion. The media promotion factor is shaped by several of the aforementioned concepts, such as likability and maintaining the status quo. In this portion of the dissertation, I examine these concepts in relation to local and national news outlets that used Twitter and the #BostonBombing hashtag to promote their content. Greer and Ferguson (2011) note that the primary goal of local news outlets, specifically TV, is to maintain and attract consumers. Larger audiences generate more revenue, but 24-hour news channels, the internet, and social media all play critical roles in the reduction of these audiences. Lu and Matsa (2016) found that more than 50% of adult American smartphone users receive news alert notifications. This data also indicates that young adults consume news using this method in similar or greater totals than older Americans (Lu & Matsa, 2016).

News outlets frequently used victims, survivors, and heroes related to the Boston Bombing to promote their content. Earlier in this chapter I referenced a frequently RTed supportive tweet from CNN Twitter accounts that celebrated the survivors and victims of the attack and that theme is relevant again. A key difference, though, is that many media outlets used victims and survivors to promote their own content instead of simply showing respect for the victims. Boston.com and CNN both used this strategy with survivors of the attack. A tweet

linking to Boston.com read “Verdict Brings Sense of ‘Justice and Relief’ to @DicDonahue <http://t.co/twwTW9jq64> #BostonBombing <http://t.co/k6dEOLeX3a>.”

It is interesting to note that Fox News is a key opinion leader in promoting their own programming. They are specifically noteworthy for the way they used Twitter to highlight a quote from a survivor named Dic Donohue. A tweet containing an image of Donohue, a quote about his reaction to the verdict, and a small series of images representing different Fox News social media accounts was frequently RTed. I also note that Fox News was interested in highlighting the feelings of a survivor of the attack and CNN focused more heavily on the individuals that were killed.

These traditional news outlets also face the challenge of losing credibility in the eyes of contemporary Americans. A Pew Research Center study notes that several technology experts and researchers believe that the current news and information climate will not improve because disruptive digital behaviors are more profitable than civil discourse (Rainie, Anderson & Albright, 2017). As previously written, these news outlets tend to disengage from negative discourse and sensational messages (Carpenter, 2010). As a way of maintaining credibility, local news sources often find ways to combine national headlines, such as the Tsarnaev trial, with hyperlocal stories that are more relevant to their consumers. With this method, local news outlets can maintain an image of professionalism and create a safe and consistent image for their consumers (Buttry, 2016).

One of the most common ways that media outlets, specifically local news affiliates, used Twitter during the data collection period was to make the story hyper local as a way of attracting local viewers. For example, a Nevada news station tweeted “#Reno runners in #BostonMarathon weigh in on #BostonBombing and have differing takes. Good job by @Marcella_Anahi

<http://t.co/RMU5xluxQZ>.” Other organizations, such as the Poynter Institute, celebrated the ways local news covered these stories. The Poynter Institute’s official Twitter account linked to a blog post showing the front page of several major newspapers and the ways the sentencing was covered in those local communities. Another example comes from CBS 46 in Atlanta. Multiple tweets from the station’s official account lead to an article written by an employee. The employee provides his perspective on the trial as a Boston native currently living in Georgia.

Media Conflict

Bloggers, independent news sources, and media critics are not bound to the norms of traditional news media. Many of these individuals use direct attacks, clickbait headlines, and sensationalism to attract their audiences (Rainie, 2017). As Ott (2017) notes, conservative and liberal individuals each consume “steady diets” (p. 65) of untrustworthy or biased news and other content that is specifically targeted at them. Ott (2017) argues that sharing information, opinions, and memes in this way limits acceptable social discourse. Furthermore, some news outlets and personalities take advantage of this fractured environment by discrediting other media. Examples of the ways media outlets and personalities discredit each other are listed in the themes below.

This fractured relationship with news media emboldened several followers to tweet their displeasure at the ways certain news outlets and personalities covered the Tsarnaev trial. A common complaint that individuals had about media outlets coverage of the sentencing was the amount of time Tsarnaev was shown onscreen or discussed instead of the victims. A 2016 Time article notes that campaigns, such as the “No Notoriety” campaign, exist in the United States to reduce the amount of news coverage murderers, terrorists, and other criminals receive (Ritchin, 2016). The campaign hopes to limit future attacks by refusing to acknowledge the attacker. Some

individuals tweeted these complaints directly at media outlets with messages such as “STOP SHOWING HIS FACE @cnnbrk: Jurors find Tsarnaev guilty on all counts that carry possible death penalty. #BostonBombing” and “RT @eThrive: Alright @cnbc I’ve turned to @FoxBusiness news now becuz u keep showing that terrorist name & face. Stop!! #BostonBombing.”

Although much of this interaction was negative, some individuals tweeted directly at media outlets to commend their work, though. Examples of these tweets are “Fact: Jake Tapper is infinitely better than @RollingStone: <https://t.co/WStlXhlSYN> #BostonBombing” and “Kudos as always to NECN for solid coverage on the #BostonBombing verdict. @mikenikitasnecn is as pro as it gets.”

Negative Messages

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed concepts that lead to negative online interactions such as information laundering and the online disinhibition effect. I also noted that my own past research has examined the types of hate speech associated with the initial attack and, therefore, it is not surprising to see similar hateful content in this study. However, it is interesting to note how many ways individuals spread their hateful messages. In this section of this dissertation, I aim to describe these different negative messages were categorized in several ways. First, I describe the criteria for coding messages this way. Any message that used Otherizing language or wished to further harm or kill Tsarnaev were coded in this category. Additionally, messages that contained links to material that supported this content or contained images of it were also included. Finally, any individuals that used derogatory remarks about others were also included in this theme

The most popular way of producing hateful messages was the *negative RT* or *negative quote RT*. To quote RT a message, a user will RT a message, but include their own response to it as well. When this occurs, their names and profile images are attached to the message. This differs greatly from the reduced emphasis of RTed content. In many of these messages, the quote RTed content often added an additional level of anger, disrespect, or a threat to the original post. An example of this includes a message that reads “‘@CNN: Dzhokhar Tsarnaev has been found guilty on all 30 counts he faced in the #BostonBombing trial’ YEAHHHHHHHHHHHH MOTHERFUCKER.”

This emergence of the quote RT is an important development because it indicates that individuals are more willing to attach their names and profile images to hateful tweets. It also shows that they will respond to neutral or informative tweets with negative content as the aforementioned tweet demonstrates. Twitter users that behave in this manner may be experiencing levels of dissociative anonymity, invisibility, and lack of authority (Suler, 2004). This also speaks to Bale’s (2017) description of incivility and simplicity being two of Twitter’s key functions. When considered together, these factors indicate how simple it is to share negative content, the lack of consequences for these behaviors, and being more willing to participate in these forums without any physical interaction with others.

The second type of negative tweets included links and media. Many users included Twitter messages that contained threatening, abusive, offensive, or embarrassing images. Other messages linked to unreliable content that was designed to promote negative beliefs about immigrants, Muslim and Arab individuals, and others. As I will explain later in this chapter, many of these images and links were directed at Women, particularly Tsarnaev’s mother and sister-in-law.

Punishment

The first theme in this category that I'd like to examine is the idea of punishment. Users frequently mentioned their desire to kill, deport, lynch, or imprison Tsarnaev, his family, and other Muslims. To provide a better understanding of punishment, I emphasize scholarship related to Foucault, specifically his book *Discipline and Punish*. As Remen (1994) notes, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* draws a comparison between the prison system and theater in that both spaces are built to transform individuals that are inside. This comparison is especially interesting as it is reminiscent of Goffman's (1956) analogy of impression management and theater. The key difference in these comparisons is that Goffman portrayed individuals as actors attempting to control the audience while Foucault argues that prisoners are both visible and changed by the space. Another similarity between these comparisons is that audiences are necessary. Remen (1994) argues that punishment and theater require audiences to assume they have enough information from the "actor" to better understand the ways individuals operate. Goffman (1956) explained that, instead of the actor, it is the audience that should be transformed by the behaviors of the actor. These comparisons are especially valuable on Twitter where individuals act as both audience and actor. Throughout the following sections, I examine the ways individuals simultaneously act as an audience with enough information about the trial and as actors that share beliefs and messages in ways that are favorable to their audience.

Death (Penalty). Negative messages produced more than 3,500 references in this study and the theme of death was easily the most common. Users freely shared their wishes about Tsarnaev's death and the death of his family members in a variety of ways. Some were thankful that he was not killed during the manhunt for him, but only because they want him to be put to death after his trial. Others wished the death penalty would not be granted, but only because they

wanted him to die in prison. These people frequently mentioned that a life sentence was a worse punishment and that death was too good for Tsarnaev. Throughout this section, I will describe the most common ways users tweeted about their wishes for Tsarnaev's eventual death.

The first negative way that users discussed Tsarnaev's death was to express their joy that he was found guilty of crimes that carried the death penalty. Messages such as "Give that Boston Bomber the death penalty. His punishment should fit the crime #BostonBombing" and "Got to be the death penalty in my opinion #BostonBombing" were common. Other messages added insults or Otherized Tsarnaev for different characteristics, such as his religion. Examples of these messages are, "#BostonBombing Tsarnaev I say death penalty for the prick #BostonStrong" or "#BostonBombing Dzhokhar Tsarnaev... guilty and now hopefully the big needle or some voltage for his Islamic ass."

Some individuals also referenced media that supported the death penalty. One message reads "RT @PatriotJackiB: Excellent point by @FoxNews: any penalty other than death in #BostonBombing will send a message to other terrorists." Another user wrote "Earth to #Boston that kid should be put to death with no questions asked. Don't fail. Make an example for all terrorists #BostonBombing." I found these messages to be particularly interesting. The user that created and RTed the first message specifically mentioned following the advice of a news program, but fails to include the context of the message or consider other lawful punishments. The desire to "send a message" was more important than following the legal system in this example. The second user was also interested in sending a message or "making an example of" Tsarnaev without adhering to US law. It is unfortunate that this coding software is unable to recognize if a connection between these users or their media consumption existed.

Some individuals qualified their message by expressing their normal resistance toward the death penalty. One user mentioned, “I’m not usually a fan of the death penalty but that scumbag Tsarnaev deserves it, and more #BostonBombing.” Another wrote “RT @OutFrontCNN: I’ve never been an advocate of the death penalty here and I hope Dzhokhar Tsarnaev gets it. #BostonBombing.” A third Twitter user that stated their opposition to the death penalty, but then noted they would “gladly make an exception” for Tsarnaev. These messages are unique in that users may have been viewed more favorably by their audience for making their messages as angry and threatening as possible. Also, qualifying these messages with statements opposing the death penalty does not undo the hostility of wishing death on an individual. Marwick and boyd (2010) note that users write messages to real or imagined audiences when they tweet. It is difficult to understand which type of audience these users are appealing to with this type of message.

As previously indicated, some individuals wanted Tsarnaev to receive a life sentence in prison because they determined that it was worse than death. One tweet read, “To be clear, I do not want Tsarnaev to get the death penalty, I want him to suffer in prison. #BostonBombing #BostonStrong.” Another popular message that was RTed read, “RT @billorme: Though #BostonStrong 4ever after #BostonBombing, this guy should not be granted martyrdom. Behind bars forever, until death from old age.” This second message is particularly interesting for the inclusion of martyrdom. Martyrdom connotes a connection to religion, but it is difficult to understand if the point of this message was to reference Tsarnaev’s religious beliefs (Sanagan, 2013).

I also want to bring awareness to a more neutral way of discussing the death penalty that overlaps with the aforementioned media theme. Several media outlets chose to ask a larger

Twitter audience about their opinion toward the death penalty. Instead of promoting a pro-death penalty or anti-death penalty stance, the purpose of this tactic is to gain a better understanding of what network connections believe. Several media outlets asked this question as a poll for their readers and viewers. One example links to a Washington Post article. The message reads “was pretty clear that #Tsarnaev would be found guilty in #BostonBombing trial. Big question is: death penalty or not? <http://t.co/9Rdiv45PEC>.” Another message links to the New York Times and reads “RT @AngusMilman: Majority of Bostonians prefer life imprisonment to death penalty in #bostonbombing case. Does that matter? Should it? <http://t.co/55Q5OgVkjy>.”

Other individuals tweeted rhetorical questions about the difference between life imprisonment and the death penalty. Examples of these messages are “Am I the only person who thinks the death penalty would be a gift more than a punishment versus life imprisonment? #BostonBombing #Tsarnaev” and “Am I think only one who thinks life in prison is worse than the death penalty #BostonBombing.” These individuals may have been asking these types of questions to see what others using the #BostonBombing hashtag would support.

Unique Killing Methods and Lynching. Another theme that emerged related to Tsarnaev’s death is for a unique killing method. For example, one Twitter user wrote, “#BostonBombing Dzhokhar Tsarnaev deserves a stoning death, send a message to these fuckwads.” This is interesting because, not only does it involve a unique method, but it builds on the aforementioned theme of message-sending instead of lawfulness. Other unique deaths include the suggestion of making him complete the Boston Marathon before receiving a lethal injection, hanging and quartering him, and allowing the people of Boston to “show no sympathy” to him. Several others volunteered to kill Tsarnaev themselves, which also bypasses American

laws. An example of these messages includes “That POS Tsarnaev will die a cowards death for what they did, just wish I could pull the trigger myself. #BostonStrong #BostonBombing.”

Another unique pattern related to death came from individuals that rarely used the term ‘death’ in their messages. Instead, they focused on the hanging method commonly related to lynching of Black individuals by White Americans during the Jim Crow era (Byrd, 2004). One individual explicitly mentioned public hanging in the message “Bring back public hanging for this douche bag that did the #BostonBombing.” Others were more indirect. Messages implied the hanging death from an oak tree such as “Tall oak and a short rope. #BostonBombing” and “Tsarnaev guilty of all 30 counts in Boston bombing, Time to get a strong rope and find a big ol’ oak tree #BostonBombing.” These messages are interesting when considering that individuals tweet at their imagined audience (Marwick and boyd, 2011). This indicates that, not only do they believe the hanging of Tsarnaev would be acceptable to their audience, but that their followers would be able to recognize the implication.

Another common example of expressing a wish for death was a tweet that used a political cartoon to express their desire for Tsarnaev’s death. The cartoon showed an image of Lady Justice extending a sword that read ‘Boston Marathon Verdict.’ Tsarnaev was hanging by his shirt on the tip of the sword which was placed above a pressure cooker. This example of the unique killing method builds on the aforementioned literature in this section by including a user-created image depicting a killing method.

I also want to include the concept of “justice” in this theme because of the intimate, and sometimes explicit, connection to death. Many individuals found that justice had been served by the 30 guilty verdicts. Examples of these messages include “Finally some justice for #BostonBombing #BostonStrong” and “I don’t say this often, but I think we got it right with the

verdict this time #Bostonbombing #bostonstrong.” Others, however, felt justice would not be served until Tsarnaev was killed. One user wrote, “The Boston Marathon bomber being found guilty is not justice. The death penalty is justice. #BostonStrong #BostonBombing.” Another user challenged an individual’s notion of justice as well. The person wrote “@marthmaccallum it’s a question of justice n not cruelty. An eye for an eye – death. #BostonBombing.”

Women. I next aim to focus on the theme of women that was discovered in this analysis. This theme was unique in the it included negative messages and links about Tsarnaev’s family members, criticism of a female politician, and occupied a space where death and political opinions overlap. As I’ve stated earlier in this dissertation, women are largely underrepresented in the technology industry (Peck, 2016) and harassed online at alarmingly high rates compared to men (Hunt, 2016). Even with this knowledge, it was surprising to see how often Tsarnaev’s family and Democratic politicians were criticized and threatened, while an Asian-American female conservative journalist was praised and supported for her targeted attack on Rolling Stone magazine. Throughout this portion of my dissertation, I examine and describe these themes in greater detail.

I want to first examine the media reaction to Tsarnaev’s family. Vocativ.com posted an article stating that Tsarnaev’s mother Zubeidat wrote a letter proclaiming her sons’ innocence (Kaufman & Vo, 2015). Other news outlets picked up on the story and shared it on their own websites and social media accounts. Zubeidat Tsarnaev then became a secondary story to the verdict of her son’s trial during the data collection period. Messages such as “RT @TrisheWhite: Angry mother of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev says #US ‘Will Pay’ <http://t.co/3xOtRVCEsJ> #Tsarnaev #BostonBombing” and “Dzhokhar Tsarnaev’s mother insists on son’s innocence amid guilty verdict #BostonBombing <http://t.co/HxATQ0un7B>.” These links refer to the New York Daily

Post and The Guardian respectively. Both articles link to the same starting point at Vocativ. This theme is interesting in showing the ways news outlets produce related content in short amounts of time to distinguish themselves from other media outlets.

In addition to sharing these media articles, many readers commented that they wished she would be deported, killed, or incarcerated. Messages such as “Rot in Hell for all of Eternity Tsarnaev. Take your mother with you #BostonBombing,” “I see Jahar’s mother has surfaced again with her anti American rants, Can’t we throw her evil ass in prison? #BostonBombing,” and “@NJopinion they should sentence that punk to Guantanamo for life and his idiot mother as well, #BostonBombing” were common. Other messages attacked her ability as a mother. One individual tweeted “Read the venom their mother is spitting, and her subtle threats, you understand where they came from. Full of hate! #BostonBombing.”

Some messages also referenced his sister-in law. One user wrote “Death penalty in a timely manner, please! And charge his brother’s wife! #BostonBombing #BostonStrong.” Another read, “RT @nextwave05: #bostonbombing i want him dead, his brother’s wife arrested 4 buying pressure cookers, and his mother deported for raising t...” The conclusion of that message indicates that it was continued in another tweet not collected by Tweet Archivist, but the message about his mother and sister-in-law is clear. Although the hatred aimed at Tsarnaev is unsurprising, it is more of a surprise that so many individuals would also comment about punishing the women closest to him.

In addition to Tsarnaev’s family members, Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren was also frequently mocked, specifically for her opposition to the death penalty. Although individuals did not express the same hatred or threaten violence toward Warren, many messages included promises to vote for her opposition or attack her views on stance on other topics, specifically

reproductive rights. Examples of these messages are “#Democrats cont to coddle Terrorists. Lizzy Warren calls for #BostonBombing perp to NOT be put to death! #GWOT #BostonStrong #DeathPenalty,” “#Elizabeth Warren opposes the Death Penalty for Dhrokar Tsarnaev. With that, she will NEVER get my vote. #bostonbombing,” and “Exactly what I expect from @SenWarren – abort as many babies as you like, but keep #terrorists alive. #BostonBombing.” These messages lend support to previously cited findings that women are frequently harassed and abused in digital spaces (Hunt, 2016).

Politics

The descriptions of targeted media and echo chambers that I described in an earlier explanation of Twitter media are important in understanding users’ political statements on Twitter as well. Instead of simply RTing a message or sharing a meme, many users allow their opinions of US government or opposing political parties to impact their tweets. Throughout this theme, I provide greater analysis of the ways users are influenced by targeted political content and how they utilize Twitter to weaponize their stereotypes and memes. I also examine social movements and the ways users responded to tweets that were designed to raise awareness about American foreign policies. In total, 390 references were included in this Politics theme of my results. These references are split up over the topics *GOP Politics*, *GOP Politics RT*, *Liberal Politics*, *Liberal Politics RT*, and *US Critical RT*. Additionally, tweets were coded in this theme if the focus of the message was to insult or discredit a politician or generalize about members of opposing political parties. One other category that was included in this theme was a group of messages that were aimed to be critical of United States foreign policy. The messages in this final theme did not include a specific political affiliation.

Political Incivility and Echo Chambers. Ott (2017) argues that Twitter fosters incivility for two primary reasons: (1) it is informal and (2) individuals do not think of others before they act out. I have examined this second point throughout this dissertation by acknowledging the ways dissociative anonymity and invisibility impact a user's behaviors. Ott's (2017) first point is very interesting though. He assumes that Twitter users de-emphasize clarity and "undermine norms that tend to enforce civility" (p. 62), but as Smith et al. (2014) note, many users tend to ignore others that do not agree with them. However, the #BostonBombing hashtag may have been the perfect topic to encourage interaction. Common political hashtags such as #tcot (Top Conservatives On Twitter) and #UniteBlue are often distributed amongst likeminded others, but #BostonBombing had much greater interaction between groups because it was not specific to a singular political party. As I have written throughout this chapter, many individuals have used this hashtag to provide information, remember victims, express anger or wish death, challenge the death penalty, or even sell their products or promote their content. With so many interpretations of the same hashtag, it leads to more interactions from people that may not normally find each other online or use Twitter to communicate.

Emotional Content and Contagion. Furthermore, the #BostonBombing was very emotional and Ott (2017) notes that these emotional messages were most likely to be RTed or responded to. Users also tend to utilize emotional language, ALL CAPS, or emojis to further emphasize their points. Messages with these characteristics may also lead to emotional contagion. Coviello, Sohn, Kramer, Marlow, Franceschetti, Christakis, and Fowler (2014) note that emotional contagion occurs when individuals "catch" an emotion from observing or interacting with another individual. Ferrara and Yang (2015) were also able to hypothesize the existence of emotional contagion on Twitter. Ott (2017) uses Donald Trump's Twitter account as

an example, noting the emotional language and ALL CAPS that are frequently used. Throughout this chapter, I have shown examples of tweets that use the same message characteristics.

Therefore, it is important to consider the role of emotional contagion in these settings, although it may be difficult to determine true contagion from individuals that just tweet to align their beliefs with those of the others in their networks.

Social Movements. As previously stated, most individuals tweeted angry messages about the views of an opposing political party, but many individuals had more measured criticisms about the United States as a whole. Prell (2012) notes that social movements are defined as “group actions that are focused on specific political and/or social issues with the underlying goal of initiating or contributing to change” (p. 222). Small (2011) and Tufekci (2013) have both examined cases of protestors using Twitter hashtags to support political and social movements. They note that this is effective particularly when geography does not allow individuals to meet in face-to-face contexts. Later in these results, I examine an individual that aimed to use the #BostonBombing hashtag to raise awareness about issues in the Middle East.

USA Abroad. @PaulGottinger only tweeted two messages containing the #BostonBombing hashtag, but provided 54 references due to his criticism of United States foreign policy. The messages read “Condemning Tsarnaev’s actions is easy. What’s harder is condemning terrorism the US regularly perpetrates in the Middle...” and “As Tsarnaev is convicted, US is hard at work creating next generation of terrorists w/ endless war on ppl of the Middle...” Another popular message that also criticized United States action in the Middle East came from the Twitter account of @imfabulous. The commonly RTed message read “#Tsarnaev will rightfully get the death penalty. After that we’ll continue ignoring 100K Iraqis killed by the

Bush Administra...” It is interesting to note that, while others did not create similar messages while including the #BostonBombing hashtag, @PaulGottinger was supported with RTs.

Safety. Many individuals used the hashtag to focus on the perceived safety of the USA if border laws were stricter. One tweet read “RT @HouseHomeland: #BostonBombing verdict is another step toward closure for our country, & shows Americans do not tolerate terror attacks.” Others wanted a deeper investigation into his Mosque. A tweet in this theme read “RT @PRPOnline: 8 people from Tsarnaev’s mosque have become involved in terrorism. Where there’s smoke... #BostonBombing #tcot #ocra #p2.” In addition to the #BostonBombing hashtag three other tags were used. Two tags are popular Conservative hashtags (#tcot & #ocra) and the third (#p2) is a negative hashtag aimed at Democrats (WPBeginner, 2017).

Politicians. As mentioned earlier in this work, the Twitter user @imfabulous referenced the deaths of thousands of Iraqis by the George W. Bush presidential administration. Several other users tweeted their anger about specific politicians, most notably Barack Obama and the aforementioned Elizabeth Warren. I will provide examples of many of these tweets here. First, it is important to note that an individual using a popular Democrat hashtag also criticized Bush in the message “Why did Bush grant political asylum to #DzhokharTsarnaev ??#BostonBombing #BostonStrong #UniteBlue.

As mentioned, many individuals focus on President Obama’s failings. Examples of these messages include “Well looks like your president has someone to pardon now #bostonbombing” and “RT MrLTavern: Put him to death before Obama has a chance to pardon him. #BostonBombing #AnthonyMartinRIP [http:’t.com/Wjon4ryCM1](http://t.com/Wjon4ryCM1).” In a surprising message, one individual tweeted support for President Obama stating, “Thank you president Obama for bringing the U.S court system back to sanity and rule of law #BostonBombing.”

Conspiracy

I next want to focus on a unique theme that I discovered in the results. The Conspiracy theme emerged when individuals challenged the jury's decision or linked Tsarnaev to a larger network of terrorists with little or no evidence. The conspiracy theme is very interesting because of the lack of research on this topic. My first goal in this portion of the dissertation is to clearly define what a conspiracy theory is. In his scathing critique of scholars' approach to studying conspiracy theories, Bale (2007) notes that the term 'conspiracy' scares and offends most scholars who hope to avoid unpleasantness related to the issue and. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) are less critical about the current literature regarding conspiracy theories, but recognize that the term is difficult to define because these theories fail to maintain a strict set of distinctions and conditions across all situations. They offer a cautious definition stating that a belief is considered a conspiracy theory "if it is an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)" (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 205).

Bale (2007) also identifies five common characteristics that conspiracy theories share. First, and most importantly, is the belief of a central figure or network that aims to subvert or damage a way of life. Jones (2010) supports this notion and provides an example of the 9/11 Truth Movement, which promotes the belief that the United States government planned and enacted the attack on the World Trade Center to limit the civil liberties of US citizens.

Bale's (2007) second shared factor of conspiracy theories is a perception of "the conspiratorial group as both monolithic and unerring in the pursuit of its goals. This group is directed from a single conspiratorial centre, acting as a sort of general staff, which plans and coordinates all of its activities down to the last detail" (p. 51). This can be seen in the example

Jones (2010) provides for the 9/11 Truth Movement, but is also present in the 2016 US Presidential campaign of Donald Trump (Kloor, 2017). He notes that President Trump demonized his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, while simultaneously discrediting his critics (Kloor, 2017). By using this strategy, Trump was able to create the perception of an evil network made up of media members and politicians that was headed by his opponent and aimed at disrupting the American way of life.

This perception of an evil network matches the third and fourth points of Bale's (2007) conspiracy theory characteristics as well. The third point notes that the network is omnipresent in its own sphere of operations and the fourth point recognizes the group as omnipotent (Bale, 2007). In the aforementioned example, President Trump was able to stoke the fears of Americans by claiming the omnipresence of Clinton's network. He indicated that this group allowed dangerous immigrants and Radical Islamic terrorists into US borders (Holley, 2017).

Bale's (2007) final characteristic of conspiracy theories are that they are irregular political traits that are motivated by historical change and development. This factor can be seen in the examples that I have described throughout this study, but extend beyond these events. Conspiracy theories regarding the JFK assassination, moon landing, and Area 51 (Time, 2008) exist as well. Each of these examples are viewed as dishonest and uncommon practices by a government or network to control and impact the lives of citizens.

Currently, there are two dominant categories of conspiracy theories. The first is referred to as Letting It Happen on Purpose (LIHOP) (Knight, 2008). LIHOP theories involve warnings to person(s) with an intimate knowledge of a situation or the power to interrupt or stop an action from taking place. Knight (2008) notes that some individuals in the Truth Movement believe that the Bush administration had knowledge that the 9/11 attacks would occur, but made the decision

not to intervene. The second category of Making It Happen on Purpose (MIHOP) occurs when an individual believes that a government or privileged class intentionally cause an event such as a terrorist attack, assassination, medical or scientific breakthrough, or another improbable event to occur. It is important to note that LIHOP and MIHOP believers often recognize a shared benefit or convenience for the dominant class, but disagree on the planning and execution of the event (Knight, 2008).

Who are Conspiracy Theorists?

Most simply, conspiracy theorists are individuals that believe and promote theories that meet the aforementioned criteria. This description fails to account for the social and political identities and perceptions of these individuals. It also ignores how these individuals find and learn about conspiracy theories, interact with likeminded others, and find tools to share their beliefs. In the following section of this study, I aim to explore these factors in greater detail.

First, it is important to note that many of these theorists are characterized as a unique subculture of Conservatives (Knight, 2008) and are believed to hide their opinions because they feel Otherized for their beliefs. Shure (2013) also notes that these individuals may be characterized by low self-esteem, potentially from feeling Otherized for various identity characteristics or beliefs. Jackson II and Moshin (2013) note that Otherizing is a way of naming and labeling individuals to separate them from the perceived norm. Otherizing can occur based on race, religion, sexuality, and other characteristics such as personal beliefs. Zevallos (2011) Many of these individuals feel this way because of mainstream ridicule from both academia, media, and even government officials. As previously written, Bale (2007) notes that scholars are closed-minded to these theorists because they “challenge the conception most educated, sophisticated people have about how the world operates and reminds them of the horrible

persecutions that absurd and unfounded conspiracy theories have precipitated or sustained in the past” (p. 47). In addition to these scholars, high-ranking government officials, including President George W. Bush, have dismissed their beliefs during times of crises (Knight, 2008).

Conspiracy theorists have also learned to question mainstream media as well. These media outlets and reporters have built on negative characterizations of conspiracy theorists as well. Articles such as “Is the Russia Investigation Turning the Left Into Conspiracy Theorists?” (Heer, 2017) and “Why Rational People Buy Into Conspiracy Theories” (Koerth-Baker, 2013) frame conspiracy theorists as irrational and Otherize them further from the perceived norm. Furthermore, in February 2017, prominent CNN reporter Jake Tapper described conspiracy theories as “False. They’re crackpot. They’re nonsense.” (Watkins, 2017). Weeks later, Fox News host Sean Hannity decried the “Alt-Left” media for pushing their own conspiracy theory against President Trump (Fox News Insider, 2017). These examples are not meant to be comprehensive, but they provide an illustration of the way the terms ‘conspiracy theory’ and ‘conspiracy theorist’ are used in contemporary media coverage.

By using the term as an insult and accusation, conspiracy theorists are shamed for their beliefs and left to seek out other forms of news and interaction. Posner (2015) notes that shaming can be critical, threatening, or abusive and is a way of establishing social control. In *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed*, Ronson (2015) explains the ways online shaming can lead to intrapersonal problems such as depression and anxiety as well as interpersonal and career issues like strained marriages, job loss, and legal issues.

Social Media

For these reasons, conspiracy theorists need to find alternate sources of news and social networks that can provide support for their beliefs. Social media has provided this network for

them. Digital spaces and communities like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook are unique in that they allow for text, links, video, and still images to be shared without any physical interaction or geographical boundaries (Small, 2011). Users in these networks are also able to access these messages by phone, computer, tablet, or other Wi-Fi enabled devices. This provides an inexpensive and interactive way of organizing and disseminating messages.

One of the most popular social media networks is Twitter. Twitter is an interesting tool in that users can create ideal networks of supportive individuals, but the semi-anonymity it allows often leads to hateful discourse. Klein (2012) introduced the theory of information laundering to describe the ways hate groups use this tool to share information and foster support. He notes that “the Internet has provided a limitless platform that enables hate groups to disguise and convert their form of illegitimate currency – hate-based information – into what is rapidly becoming acceptable web-based knowledge” (p. 431). I argue that this theory can be broadened to include conspiracy theories as well as the aforementioned hate-based information. Klein (2012) also explains that this information is shared online by adding it to websites that mimic more reliable news sources, creating blogs, and using social media to create a formal environment for non-traditional beliefs.

One specific place where these beliefs can be legitimized is Twitter. Twitter is a specifically useful place for conspiracy theories because users can express themselves more openly (Ott, 2017). Twitter users can feel more confidence and anonymity in expressing their beliefs by hiding behind false names and images (Suler, 2004). Ott (2017) also notes that Twitter is defined by simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility. These characteristics allow users to create and share content with individuals they trust, promote content without fact-checking, and use abusive language and tactics toward users that they do not agree with or attempt to shame them.

Ott (2017) also explains that individuals from the Right and Left can utilize Twitter to create echo chambers of information that allow them to block out any information that does not support or confirm their beliefs. Ott's (2017) research is interesting, but it ignores individuals that feel ignored or insulted by the major American political parties, such as conspiracy theorists.

Social networking research also indicates that it is likely conspiracy theorists would utilize the network to find and interact with each other as well. Smith, Rainie, Schneiderman, and Himelboim (2014) identify tight crowds and polarized networks as two of their primary categories of social networks. The scholars found that individuals in tight crowd networks are closely connected with others that share their beliefs or interests related to a specific topic (Smith et. al, 2014). These networks are similar in the way they form and are maintained. Twitter users often find each other through similar interests or a common hashtag. Once users tweet about the hashtag they are often adopted by likeminded others while simultaneously Otherized by anyone that disagrees with their message. This allows users to find support while maintaining their skepticism of others or aggression toward them. This research has often focused on the two-party political system, but I argue that conspiracy theorists follow this same pattern.

I now aim to focus on a variety of themes that emerged in this dataset. These themes include references to False Flags, crisis actors, and mistrust of individuals in positions of power.

False Flag/FalseFlag/#FalseFlag. The phrase "false flag" was used in a variety of contexts and was the most common term used throughout all the collected data. The term is used with correct spelling, spelled as one word, and used as a hashtag. The phrase false flag is defined as "an incident that is designed to deceive people into thinking it was carried out by someone else" (Giambruno 2013, para. 5). This indicates that conspiracy theorists believe that Tsarnaev was innocent or carried out a plan that was created by someone more powerful. In most

examples, Twitter users supported the latter belief. One user tweeted “@AzulayRomond The #BostonBombing was a FALSE FLAG event. You people need to wake the fuck up. #BostonMarathonBombing.” Another noted “#BostonBombing = #FalseFlag #ResearchPut your emotions aside #Think Do you really THINK the #MSM would tell you the #TRUTH#PoliceState.”

As mentioned, some users focused on Tsarnaev’s innocence. One user tweeted “#BostonBombing was an inside job so america could test her police state. That kid was set up. America is know for false flag operations.” This message indicates that Tsarnaev was a victim of a larger plot. Other messages that focus on Tsarnaev’s innocence in a more indirect matter by focusing on the trial. One Twitter user commented with a media link to a YouTube channel dedicated exposing the Boston Marathon Bombing trial as a hoax. The message reads “Boston Hoaxathon Trial Nothing But A Scripted Sham <https://t.co/KDLx3c1Iwa>#Hoax #Tsarnaev #BostonBombing #BostonStrong #FalseFlag #Fake.”

One of the most common words used in these descriptions is Tsarnaev’s role as a “patsy.” A patsy is defined as “a person who is easily taken advantage of, especially by being cheated or blamed for something” (Oxford, 2017). This term is linked to the false flag narrative because it suggests that Tsarnaev was framed for the crime or unaware of the consequences of his actions. One individual used the term “brother” to accompany patsy as an indication of his innocence. The message reads “@NickZThomas To think they may execute #patsy brother when #craft and #fema clearly staged #BostonBombing with #crisis actors #Tourniquet.” Another used the term primarily as a way of insulting others that had more traditional beliefs/ A message reads “Pasty #DzhokharTsarnaev was found guilty on all 30 counts. SHOCKER!Stuff, and the #sheep who buy into is, just crack me up.#BostonBombing.”

Crisis Actors. Another common characteristic of conspiracy theory messages is the belief that crisis actors were used to embellish the impact of the attack or outright deny that the attack occurred. According to Rational Wiki (2017), a Wikipedia-style website aimed at educating individuals with unorthodox views, crisis actors are defined as “supposedly professional actors used by government agencies and/or mainstream media to deceive the public with portrayals of trauma and suffering. Specifically, they act as victims or witnesses in staged school shootings or hoax terrorist attacks” (Rational Wiki 2017, para. 1). One frequently retweeted message read “RT @elzhi_fan: CRISIS ACTORS ARE USED IN ALL FALSE FLAG EVENTS#SandyHook#BostonBombing#TsarnaevVerdict And so on and so on!! <http://t.c...>” The message included a link to a still image of a woman that was supposedly killed in the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting, but was also later injured in the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing. The image provides no proof that the woman was an actress or involved in either event, but was shared often among individuals promoting a conspiracy theory.

It is also important to note that crisis actors hold a very negative reputation within the conspiracy theory community. As previously written, conspiracy theorists are often viewed as a uniquely Conservative group and believe themselves to be fighting for truth and in defense of the United States Constitution. The thought of crisis actors lying to Americans and leading to a police state or reduced freedoms is deeply offensive and un-American to these individuals. One user wrote “Praying all participating in the #BostonBombing propaganda campaign burn in hell with the #SandyHook crisis actors for their communistic act.” This message was unique in that the user focused solely on crisis actors from the Sandy Hook school shooting, but others maintained focus on Boston. One user wrote “#BostonBombing:Was a setup and crisis

actors(amputees) were used.A video shows a guy in a wheelchair with both legs blown off but no blood!”

Perhaps the most influential users to tweet about crisis actors was @darren_Dazmav. @darren_Dazmav received the most RTs of conspiracy theory tweets collected in this study. The user produced four tweets and three of them specifically focused on crisis actors.

@darren_Dazmav tweeted a message with an image that was used as proof that a crisis actor was involved in the Aurora Shooting, Sandy Hook shooting, and Boston Bombing. He also tweeted a message that indicated crisis actors and false flag attacks are intimately linked. The message noted that “CRISIS ACTORS ARE USED IN ALL FALSE FLAG EVENTS” and used a series of hashtags providing many of the conspiracy examples. The final crisis actor tweet provided another example of an “unfortunate lady” that was supposedly injured or killed in multiple terrorist attacks and school shootings.

Mistrust of Government and Media. The final category that I will include is the mistrust of government and media. This category is unique because there is very little consensus among conspiracy theorists about who is responsible for the act. In this section, I will provide examples of tweets that show the level of mistrust that exists toward government and media agencies. I first examine government. Some individuals believed that the attack was the result of NSA failure. One individual wrote “BEFORE WE APPLAUD THE #BOSTONBOMBING VERDICT, LET’S ALL ASK WHY THE NSA SPYING DIDN’T PREVENT IT. GOOD DAY.” Other individuals blamed the military with messages stating that the Tsarnaev brothers were victims after their backpacks (containing the explosive devices) were switched by a Navy Seal team. Others believed that individual politicians were responsible for their failure to protect citizens during the attack. One user praised Vladimir Putin for warning Hillary Clinton about

how dangerous the Tsarnaev brothers were, but implied that she failed to act. The user also mentioned that the Clinton family was “always bad.”

Next, I examine mistrust toward media. One Twitter user challenged all of mainstream media by writing “All week the MSM is pushing the official story of the #BostonBombing While Millions of people are waking up to the truth, it was staged.” Other individuals challenged specific media organizations. One Twitter user wrote “Drill being performed at the same time... Sound Familiar ? #BostonBombing #Anonymous” and included an image of the Boston Globe’s Twitter account warning citizens of a controlled bombing in the area before the attack occurred. Others questioned the authenticity of the trial and the verdicts that were reported by the media.

Supportive

It is now important to note that another popular way of reacting to the Tsarnaev verdict on Twitter was share supportive messages. I include this content here because users that shared empathetic and supportive messages used many of the same message creation tactics and focused on similar themes as individuals that created negative tweets. Twitter users tweeted or RTed more than 5,600 messages that were coded as expressing support for these individuals. Additionally, more than 150 messages were coded as displaying positive emotions or wishing for an end to hate, anger, and violence. These messages share numerous characteristics with the aforementioned informative and negative themes, such as linking to outside content, personal language, and frequent RTs. I will draw on literature that I have incorporated into this dissertation already, such as the online disinhibition effect and likability. First, I explain the criteria for categorizing supportive tweets. Tweets were coded as supportive if users were opposed to killing or torturing. They were also coded in this theme if the primary focus of the message was to celebrate or remember the victims and survivors of the attack.

In this dissertation, I have written at length about Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect. These descriptions have focused on the toxic elements of this concept, but Suler (2004) notes that the same factors that lead to negative behaviors online can promote positive behaviors as well. The author refers to the positive behaviors as benign disinhibition. These factors include dissociate anonymity, asynchronicity, invisibility, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority. I examine four of these characteristics and the ways they relate to supportive message throughout this section of the study.

The dissociative anonymity factor implies that users may feel less vulnerable because of the semi-anonymity they experience online (Suler, 2004). This factor is also closely related to invisibility. As Suler (2004) notes, users may feel less vulnerable when they are not able to be seen or are unable to see the physical response of others. Earlier in this study, I explained that these factors often lead to negative behaviors such as hate speech and threatening language, but the opposite is true as well. Callahan and Inckle (2012) explain that individuals in need of support, specifically those seeking mental health treatment, found that invisibility and a willingness to show their vulnerability felt comfortable meeting with counselors in an online setting. Several studies found that individuals were more willing to share personal, embarrassing, or medical details in online interviews (Barratt, 2011; Elmir, Schmied, Jackson & Wilkes, 2011) and Dewey (2016) explained that the online forum, Reddit, was successful in assisting individuals in the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program.

Asynchronicity is another important factor in positive online interactions. Unlike face-to-face interactions, digital communication does not require immediate responses from conversation partners. In these scenarios, users have more time to craft thoughtful messages and consider the impact of their tweet before sending it (Suler, 2004). This also allows users to consider the

effects their message may have on an unintended digital audience, such as non-followers that may see an RTed message, before the message is posted. Solipsistic introjection is also closely related to this concept. As mentioned earlier, this concept explains that internet users assign human qualities to another individual in a text-based environment. In digital settings, especially settings that include unknown others, internet users often look for context clues and characteristics to better understand their interaction (Suler, 2004). This requires time, care, and attention to accomplish. Asynchronicity allows users time to consider their audience and create messages that closely align with their own social needs and the needs of their partner(s).

As previously mentioned in this chapter, Twitter users enjoy interacting with media and followers that they consider likeable. Likability is defined as “the extent to which a perceiver likes another, perhaps because of similarities” (Meyer, Marchionni & Thorson, 2010, p. 103). In addition to likability of media, users also create connections with celebrities and public figures that they may interact with on Twitter (Kim & Song, 2016). This is important to note because of these individuals’ social presence and influence in digital spaces. Kim and Song (2016) note that “with easy access to direct and interactive communication methods with celebrities, fans following celebrities through social media may feel like they ‘know’ the celebrity and experience increased intimacy and a strong parasocial relationship” (p. 570). In their survey research, the authors also found individuals feel that celebrities are socially present when they disclose personal information and they create imaginary interpersonal relationships with celebrities that interact with others (Kim and Song, 2016).

Death Penalty. Earlier in this dissertation, I focused on how media outlets used this event to share content about the victims, survivors, and their families. I also noted that media organizations used these supportive messages to promote their own content. Individual Twitter

users also used this event to tweet empathetic and supportive messages that wish for safety and an end to killing. The most common type of message in this theme was a denouncement of the death penalty. Examples of these tweets include messages such as, “Sorry Im against death penalty. I believe in forgiveness. I believe people change for good. It’s the Christian in me talking #BostonBombing”, and “I’m morally against death penalty for anyone) bc everyone needs a chance to think abt their actions & learn right from wrong. #BostonBombing.

#BostonStrong

In addition to the aforementioned theme of the death penalty, another theme that contained both positive and negative characteristics was the perception of #BostonStrong. The #BostonStrong phrase and hashtag was popular in the wake of the attack. The phrase signified that the attack would not discourage the citizens of Boston and was soon sold on apparel with much of the proceeds benefitting the victims and survivors of the attack. The phrase was used often as a supportive message during the trial of Tsarnaev as well. One user tweeted, “I’ve changed my avi in support of survivors and those that were lost in #BostonBombing. We all are #BostonStrong.” Other individuals used this phrase to support the media. An individual tweeted, “the media is being exceptionally respectful to #survivors of #BostonBombing. Nicely done! #boston #BostonStrong #marathon.” Finally, some individuals referred to the “dirty water” song that has become synonymous with Boston sports. A user noted, “.@flashOlife Love that dirty water, #BostonStrong you’re my home!!! #BostonBombing.” These tweets all signify a connection to Boston and support for individuals that were affected by the attack. It is especially interesting to note that some individuals changed their profile picture (or avatar/avi) to be supportive of Boston. This is a common social media tactic used to show support for victims of an attack or individuals that are marginalized in society (Penney, 2015).

In my previous research about the Boston Bombing, I noted that one of the common impression management strategies was to present oneself as a “patriot” (Brojakowski, 2016, p. 171). These “patriots” would tweet derogatory statements, threats, and insults to their general audience and others that interacted with them. A similar theme emerged in this research centered around the phrase Boston Strong. Throughout these results, specifically in the tweets related to killing Tsarnaev or justice being served, this phrase was used often. I will not repeat examples containing this phrase that were used in previous themes, but I will note another interesting finding related to this term. Individuals often qualified their statements about living in other parts of the country, but feeling connected to the #BostonStrong movement. One example of this comes from an individual that wrote the message “I’m a New Yorker & completely Anti-Boston but the #BostonBombing reminds me that they’re still apart of our beautiful country. #BostonStrong.”

Analysis

Earlier in this dissertation, I posed several research questions. I now aim to examine those questions with the results I discovered in this study. Before I examine each of these questions, I aim to explain the common message creation functions that were used by individuals in the data set. I hoped to learn if users would create original unique tweets, utilize the mention function, RT messages, or link to other blogs and media. Based on the data collected for the #BostonBombing hashtag, users overwhelmingly utilized the RT and link features. This is interesting from an impression management perspective because it indicates that people are more likely to share information rather than share their own thoughts. Earlier in this study, I referenced Ott’s (2017) study that indicated people would RT because it is simple and link because Twitter doesn’t allow nuanced conversation. I also noted studies by Marwick and boyd (2010) and Yun and Park

(2011) that described the real and imaginary audiences that individuals tweet for as well as the fear of feeling ostracized or insulted for sharing their opinions. I also feel that Suler's (2004) dissociative anonymity concept is relevant here because individuals may RT content and not feel ownership of it. I argue that each of these characteristics contribute to users' decisions to RT and link to material instead of creating their own.

The first research question I posed is directed at the ways Twitter users utilize the different message creation tactics to advance Digital Whiteness Imperialism. I first asked how media organizations used their main accounts to advance this theory. As described earlier in this study, news outlets are frequently criticized for a lack of diversity in their organizations and the ways they cover news stories of non-White individuals (Mastro, 2009). In this study, I found that CNN was the leading opinion leader in creating Twitter content. Many of CNN's tweets focused on Tsarnaev's guilt by often tweeting the results of each count that was read. It is important to note that CNN often used neutral language about Tsarnaev and refrained from using words such as "Muslim," "terrorist," or "jihad" that were more common in other tweets.

In addition to covering the trial, CNN was also influential in providing a message remembering the victims of the attack in 2013. This message and link were RTed hundreds of times and even included celebrity involvement after other popular users RTed the message. Conversely, another major news outlet, Fox News, also focused on survivors, but they did so in a way that was used as a promotional tool for their own social media and programming. It is important to note that Fox News was considerably less influential in producing content about the trial and charges in messages that contained the #BostonBombing hashtag.

I then asked how individual media personalities advanced Digital Whiteness Imperialism. Interestingly, the only mainstream media personality to be a significant opinion leader in this

study was an Asian-American woman, Michelle Malkin. As mentioned earlier in this study, Malkin describes herself by using feminine terms such as “wife” and “mother,” (Malkin, 2017, para. 1) but challenges the existence of racism and sexism while contributing to a news organization that is owned by conservative media personality Mark Levin (Levin, 2017). This perspective led to her targeted attack against Rolling Stone magazine in which she criticized their coverage of Tsarnaev, their non-response to the verdict, and their association with the “jihadi cover boy.” Her messages clearly support a conservative perspective that challenges diversity in media, specifically as it relates to media Twitter accounts.

I also wanted to examine the ways individuals maintained or supported Digital Whiteness Imperialism. It is interesting that most users simply RTed other Twitter accounts, most often media or media personality accounts. Ott (2017) notes that this tactic is a simple feature of Twitter and Kim and Song (2016) found that RTing was a supportive tactic. In cases where users quote RTed messages or created their own content they often became more extreme in their beliefs, especially as it related to violence and punishment.

Finally, I wanted to examine the ways users challenged Digital Whiteness Imperialism on Twitter. The group of individuals that created the largest challenge to the status quo was the conspiracy theorists. These individuals had varying opinions about how the attack occurred, but they were the only group willing to entertain any other result than the jury’s decision. As stated, many of these individuals felt that the US government were involved in the attack or that Tsarnaev was a patsy. It is important to note that not all of the individuals in this group challenged digital whiteness imperialism, though. Several of these individuals believed that Tsarnaev was part of a larger Islamic community that encouraged the attacks.

Other individuals found ways to challenge media coverage of the event as well. As described earlier in this chapter, several users wanted a larger focus on the victims of the attack instead of Tsarnaev so they angrily tweeted at media organizations to limit the amount of coverage Tsarnaev received and to focus on the victims of the attack and their families. Although this is important to note, this criticism of media did not call for more diverse voices in media or online.

I next examined the ways users created negative and harmful content from their own Twitter accounts. I provided several examples of these negative tweets earlier in this study and noted that I found Twitter users were more likely to create more extreme tweets about punishment, death, and violence. It was interesting to see that users were most willing to RT others or share content, but when they created original content, it was often related to the negative emotions. Users were much more willing to express anger or frustration than they were to create informative messages or ask questions to encourage discussion. This is unsurprising as Suler (2004) notes that users frequently create negative content in digital environments. Additionally, Sunstein (2009) found that users are more likely to move to these extremes when they are in groups of likeminded others. It appears that these extreme beliefs are accelerated in social media or may never dissipate. It also seems that individuals become more interested in using impression management strategies to maintain their status in the networks, such as tweeting creative death threats, than they are at considering the impact of their messages.

Additionally, very few tweets in this study were meant to challenge the opinions of others, which indicates most people are willing to ignore content they disagree with or do not follow others who share different opinions. This shows more support for (Smith et al., 2014) that

individuals often interact in clusters with others that share their beliefs instead of engaging with individuals that have opposing viewpoints.

My final question explored how Twitter users created supportive and empathetic messages during this time. I found these results to be shockingly similar to the responses found about harmful content. Again, people were satisfied with RTing messages and creating less unique content. Furthermore, they rarely interacted with individuals that had opposing viewpoints or responded to others. The primary difference that I found in this theme was that the messages were much less extreme than the harmful messages. Many of these messages discouraged the death penalty, focused on the victims of the attack, and encouraged peace, but none of these tweets approached extremist beliefs.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I introduced the theory of Digital Whiteness Imperialism by drawing from computer-mediated communication, critical intercultural communication, sociology, architecture, and network analysis. I also used critical qualitative big data research to examine the Boston Marathon Bombing as a case study for this theory. The data set for this project included more than 12,000 tweets and contained over 36,000 references which included tweet content, URLs, and user mentions. By studying the Boston Marathon Bombing and the trial of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, I was able to examine an emotional topic and hashtag that was used by members of multiple political parties and news media outlets. In this final chapter, I summarize many of the themes that were described throughout this study and draw connections between them. I first note that the unused tweets that contained language issues or were missing context will not be included in this chapter.

Key Findings

The first theme I want to examine is death. This was consistent across multiple themes, specifically the supportive, negative, and political themes. This was interesting as many people consider this to be a taboo topic that is meant to be discussed privately and with trustworthy company (Peacock, 2014). However, it was used freely in a variety of context, even going so far as to volunteer to commit murder or challenge government actions. I feel that this supports a point I noted in the conclusion of the previous chapter about group extremism (Sunstein, 2009). I am also interested in examining this extremism from a cultivation theory perspective. Although this theory has roots in television research (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999), I contend that this may be applicable to social media as well. I argue this because individuals may submerge themselves

in their networks, the use of blogs and video can replace TV as a medium, and it may create a similar effect to the Mean World Syndrome (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

I also believe that extremism research in social networks can benefit from examining this work from an emotional contagion perspective. More research is necessary to understand how message construction and images can contribute to the ways users feel while using social media (Ott, 2017; Ferrara & Yang, 2015).

I am also interested in examining this group membership as it relates to #BostonStrong. This theme was also used in numerous categories, specifically in supportive and negative messages. #BostonStrong is unique because it began as a supportive motto that was also used to sell merchandise with funds benefitting the victims of the attack. People also adopted a #BostonStrong lifestyle through their behaviors of donating blood and food, volunteering, and creating social events (Zimmer, 2013). Today, though, it seems that this message has been lost. As seen in the previous chapter, many individuals used this phrase to promote anger and political agendas. Clauss (2016) also references another #BostonStrong movement. He notes that the phrase has been subverted by individuals wishing to market products with this slogan to tourists instead of respecting the deep meaning it originally held. Research regarding the shifting meanings of these movements in digital and offline spaces is needed. Furthermore, it is important to understand if resistance to these shifting meanings exists and the ways in which individuals resist.

This relates to another important finding related to supportive and empathetic messages. As I have described, research shows that supportive messages online can be very helpful for individuals that may be nervous to seek support offline. However, tweets that show support for victims or criticize a violent punishment, like the examples in this research, are rarely directed at

anyone specifically. The impact that these messages have to their intended audience and others that may be exposed to them is unclear. Further research into the ways supportive hashtags indirectly reach audiences is necessary.

Another intriguing finding relates to messages that subvert the #BostonBombing hashtag. Much of the previous research looks at the way twitter users subvert hashtags for marketing and social issues such as the #myNYPD hashtag (Jackson & Welles, 2015). Interestingly, this research shows that these subversive messages were largely ignored even though it was an attempt to capitalize on an emotional issue. This finding shows that trending topics beyond organizational and marketing hashtags are subject to subversive methods.

It is also important to examine the way subversive messages fit into the model that Twitter promotes on its own website. Some may argue that subversive messages may not exist on Twitter. As previously stated, Ferrara and Yang (2015) mention that Twitter is designed primarily for sharing information and each of the subversive messages provided some type of information, including information about timely social issues in the case of Walter Scott. This statement is even supported by Twitter's own About page which reads "Our mission: To give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" (Twitter, 2017, para. 1). Although I have challenged this mission by referencing Whiteness, the digital divide, location challenges, financial challenges, organizational standards, and norms created by early adopters, the lack of barriers indicates that there are no right and wrong ways to share information on this site.

Conversely, one may argue that correct ways of using Twitter exist and should be followed. In Brock's (2012) Discourse Analysis of reactions to Black Twitter, he noted that a precedent has been set for policing "correct" ways to use Twitter. He addresses a White

perspective of Twitter that explains Twitter is for “geeks” that interact with real friend. The same individual argues that simply using hashtags to interact with others is an incorrect use of the program, therefore, subverting hashtags for self-promotion would likely match this cultural norm of digital behavior.

I also want to consider the findings about conspiracy theorists that were discovered in this study. I acknowledged the lack of existing research in this area and hope that scholars will be open to examining this topic in future studies. I found it very interesting, though, that the impression management strategies used by conspiracy theorists were very similar to others, despite having very different beliefs. They shared media, RTed frequently, and freely discussed taboo topics such as politics. It is interesting that these individuals are frequently Otherized for their beliefs, but behave in similar ways.

Limitations & Future Directions

The purpose of this dissertation was to use critical interpretive qualitative methods to introduce the concept of Digital Whiteness Imperialism. The research focused on the conclusion of the Dzhokhar Tsarnaev verdict when he was found guilty of all 30 charges that were brought against him. More than 3,000 tweets were collected during a 48-hour span and analyzed using a thematic analysis coding method. I now encourage other scholars to further examine the concept of Digital Whiteness Imperialism by applying this to other scenarios with the use of other methods. In this portion of the dissertations, I address limitations within my own work and offer suggestions for future research.

One limitation within this study that is common among social media research is the existence of trolls. As stated earlier in this study, trolls aim to disrupt conversations, antagonize others, and share material unrelated to the topic (Phillips, 2015). Although I did not find any

obvious examples of trolling, it was difficult to interpret if all the conspiracy theory messages, some of the subversive content, and particular messages in the coordinated attack against Rolling Stone were legitimate. Each of these scenarios were uniquely qualified to support trolling culture, but little trolling seemed to occur.

A second limitation with this study involves the data collection process. Collecting tweets containing the #BostonBombing hashtag was extremely useful for a qualitative big data study focusing on the ways people produce messages, but was less effective in measuring the ways people communicate with each other. As stated earlier in this dissertation, some data was unable to be used because context was missing as part of a conversation. If only one message in a Twitter thread or conversation contained the #BostonBombing hashtag, the rest of the relevant messages were left out of the data collection. Furthermore, I explained the ways individuals and media used Twitter to ask questions about this topic, both to encourage discussion and to participate in media polls, but the data collection tools were unable to provide adequate content about the responses to these tweets. This issue must be addressed in future studies if scholars hope to understand the ways users converse in these scenarios.

Finally, I hope future research about Digital Whiteness Imperialism focuses on social capital that users may be able to acquire from using Twitter, and other social media, to address popular and controversial trending topics. One may study this from an individual interpersonal perspective or from a mass media perspective. I also encourage scholars to examine Digital Whiteness Imperialism from a more sociological perspective. Prell (2012) mentions the similarities between the sociological concept of “social circles” and the idea of clique overlap in network analysis. Examining these concepts further could provide a more complete analysis of Digital Whiteness Imperialism.

Conclusion

In this study, I have introduced the theory of Digital Whiteness Imperialism. I have drawn from literature related to critical intercultural communication, interpersonal communication, computer-mediated communication, sociology, architecture, and network analysis to provide a comprehensive overview of this topic. I then conducted a critical qualitative thematic analysis of more than 12,000 tweets containing the hashtag #BostonBombing as a case study to examine this theory. Several themes emerged from this analysis and descriptions of each were provided. I hope this dissertation is successful in furthering studies related to social media, digital impression management, intercultural communication, and critical qualitative computer-mediated communication.

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