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Walden University

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Walden University

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Lisa H. Koh-Herlong

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and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2015

Abstract

High School Graduates' Perspectives on the Creation of Online Identities

by

Lisa H. Koh-Herlong

MS, Walden University, 1999

BA, Virginia Tech, 1982

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

November 2015

Abstract

Technological advancements continue to increase online accessibility and the virtual population. As students engage with these advancements, their lives and identities will be on a worldwide platform. The realities of online identities present a challenge for educators to teach students how to manage those online identities. Researchers have studied the after-effects of online identities, but there is a gap in understanding the individual's thought process during the creation of online identities. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to understand the perspectives of working high school graduates regarding the creation of online identities. The research questions were designed to elicit recent high school graduates' perceptions or viewpoints about creating online identities. The conceptual framework for this study included social identity theory and computer-mediated communication theory. Data were collected from 9 face-to-face interviews, including the creation of summary sheets, and were analyzed via member checking and extensive manual coding. Eight themes emerged, revealing that online identities were created to support social connections. The participants' responses generated 4 types of online identities: real, desired, enhanced, and deceptive. Participants did not place consideration into the idea that they were creating an identity. Recommendations included an application for educators to model online behavior and to help students manage their online identities. Further studies could include a data gathering tool that uses an anonymous platform. These findings can inform curriculum and expand the landscape of the literature toward the social change goal of helping students grow and thrive in the online world in a safe, effective, and ethical manner.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my father, Clifford U. Koh. He worked toward his doctoral degree in the United States during the 1960s. English was his second language, and the cultural barriers prevented him from completing his doctorate degree. Now, in the 2000s, the world has become a much more global community where people embrace cultural differences and recognize diversity for the benefits it brings to society. My father would have succeeded in today's environment. I pushed forward during this entire process in dedication to him. He is not here today to see how his values of love, perseverance, strength, and educational importance helped me to achieve one of my greatest accomplishments.

Acknowledgments

I could not have completed this degree without the love and encouragement of my family. George, my husband, supported me unconditionally throughout the many years of this process. He gave me the necessary push each time I thought I wanted to quit. Linda Morrisey, my sister, and Pattie Koh, my mother, wanted this degree for me perhaps more than I did. Bill Coberly's role in our family provided me the friendship and the peace of mind to focus on my studies. Jim Morrisey's like-minded outlook on the importance of education was always inspirational for me. Thank you to my amazing family.

The second greatest support system was my academic mentors and leaders. My committee members provided me with exceptional, pragmatic, and valuable advice every step of the way. I extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Abbie Brown, Dr. Tim Green, and Dr. Christina Dawson for their time, support, and guidance on my journey. Every one of their comments significantly increased the quality of my work. A very special thank you goes to my committee chair, Dr. Abbie Brown. I feel so fortunate to have had the opportunity to tap into his brilliant mind. Every moment with him brought great value to me personally and to my doctoral journey. Dr. Abbie Brown is the icon of the word mentor. Webster did not provide enough words to express my heartfelt appreciation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

As the number of online identities rapidly increases, educators will increasingly need to teach to and about the world of online identities. Schmidt and Cohen (2013) predicted, “In the next decade, the world’s virtual population will outnumber the population of earth,” which means, “the basics of online identity could also change” (pp. 32-33). Technological advancements will continue to increase online accessibility, the virtual population, and tools that involve online identities. Students will continue to grow with these advancements as their entire life and identity from birth to death will be on a worldwide platform (Schmidt & Cohen, 2013). Education and curriculum will also need to grow with this increase and change in how students manage and create online identities.

Preparing for an unknown future is a challenge. In the 1990s, educators needed to incorporate teaching unknown 21st-century skills into their classrooms (Boomer, Lester, Onore, & Cook, 1992; Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1998). Likewise, in 2001, as teachers learned to use the current technological tools in their classroom, they were unaware of the upcoming launch of Web 2.0. Teachers did not know how the advancements of Web 2.0, introduced later that decade, would soon change the face of educational technology. Torp and Nevalainen (2010) stated that new teachers should not teach as their teachers did, due to Web 2.0. The very nature of teaching, learning, and interacting is different (Torp & Nevalainen, 2010).

Following Torp and Nevalainen's (2010) advice, the current and next generations of educators need a new model of teaching. DeVoe (2009) recommended teachers help

students learn how to create their social network online identity. Ohler (2011) stated that schools need to understand the phenomenon to create a practical approach to helping students integrate into the digital world. The approach should be proactive and not reactive, should not be subtle, and should carry a strong message (Ohler, 2011). The results of this qualitative study describe the perspectives of high school graduates as they created their online identities. Having an understanding of their perspective provides data for educators to begin teaching to and about the changing landscape of online identities.

In Chapter 1, I begin with the background, problem, and purpose of the study, followed by a brief introduction of the framework and methodology. In Chapters 2 and 3, I cover those concepts in more depth. The next sections of this chapter include the study's assumptions, scope, and limitations. Finally, the significance of the study for social change closes this first chapter.

Background of the Study

The growth in online identities presents a challenge to educators. Hollandsworth, Dowdy, and Donovan (2011) pushed the sense of urgency to teach students proper digital citizenship, stating that the rapid rate at which technology advances is a challenge for educators. Hollandsworth et al. warned that educators have not been able to keep up with the speed of the release of technological innovations. If educators do not catch up to the advancements of technology, the digital culture will overrun any teaching efforts (Hollandsworth et al., 2011). The immense and immediate need to teach digital citizenship will be further out of reach (Hollandsworth et al., 2011).

Digital citizenship, a 21st-century term, covers many areas of online behavior. The National Cyber Security Alliance (2011) categorized online behavior in terms of safety, security, and ethics. Hollandsworth et al. (2011) defined digital citizenship as more than just being a good citizen in the digital world. There are other aspects of digital citizenship such as safety and security, ethical and legal considerations, and student behaviors and actions that add value to the digital community (Hollandsworth et al., 2011). Ribble (2012) provided a broader definition, stating that digital citizenship is the concept and the behaviors that students need to know to live in the technological world. All definitions point to the same result. Educators, accustomed to preparing students for life and interaction in the face-to-face world, now also need to prepare students for life in the cyber world. Existing in the online world equates to having an online identity or multiple online identities.

Two primary categories emerged from an analysis of the existing research on online identities. The first category is the general use of online identities. While there are many uses, four themes that emerged from the literature that pertain to educators are

- online identities related to education;
- online identities related to online social interaction;
- online identities related to an adult citizen; and
- online identities related to possible dangers.

While the first issue is specific to education, all four aspects will be a part of students' lives as they progress through school and become adult citizens in society. The latter three themes are a part of the larger picture that currently plays or will play a role in

students' online lives with online identities. Chapter 2 includes a review of each of the four general themes.

The second category has a narrower focus and contains the literature on the specific uses of online identities and their relationship to students. There are four subthemes in this strand. The four areas are logistics, anonymity, avatars, and social identity, and Chapter 2 covers those topics in more detail. The data that are missing from these subthemes are the understanding of the perspective of students as they create their online identities. Understanding this perspective can help educators to follow Torp and Nevalainen's (2010) and DeVoe's (2009) advice to use applicable teaching methods in this Web 2.0 era.

Although students and adults have been using online identities for almost two decades, the concept of an online identity gradually appeared with time and technological advancements. Unlike Web 2.0 or other tangible technical releases, the introduction of online identities did not have the same type of definitive entrance. Now with the predicted growth in the virtual population (Schmidt & Cohen, 2013), there is a need to address the topic of online identity creation directly. Hollandsworth et al. (2011) stated a sense of urgency exists for educators to help guide students to use instructional technology in a safe and ethical manner. In response to their urgent call to educate students, the results of this study begin to provide data to help inform best practices for teaching about the creation and uses of online identities.

Problem Statement

Educators have the challenge of addressing best practices, with students, in using and creating online identities. The evolving, technology-rich, online environment provides students with the opportunity to create one or multiple online identities. This new opportunity needs a new model for educators to teach *self* (Seery, 2010). Seery (2010) stated that the traditional ways of teaching about self do not work for teaching about self in the online world. Instead, educators need a new method that applies to the online world. The traditional practice of developing self within a group relies on being with others in the same place and relies on the senses of touch, sight, sound, and even scent (Seery, 2010). In contrast, according to Seery, social gatherings online, such as social networking pages, do not contain those same variables. Creating different online identities may offer positive benefits, but the opportunity has to balance with safety concerns (Ohler, 2011). It is not possible to anticipate every unintended consequence; however, educators need to respond quickly to provide the correct guidance for students (Ohler, 2011). Problems associated with online identities, particularly anonymous identities, include cyberbullying (Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012) and cyber hate crimes (Citron & Norton, 2011). Other problems include troubled relationships due to the confusion between real and virtual identities (Parker, 2009) and societal crimes, such as financial fraud and identity fraud (Evans-Pughe, 2008).

The concept and use of online identity evolve as technology advances, especially within the constructs of the capabilities presented with Web 2.0 (Torp & Nevalainen, 2010). Research exists on topics such as the effects and uses of such online identities as

blogs (Kedrowicz & Sullivan, 2012), virtual worlds (DeZwart & Lindsay, 2012), and relationship building (Davis, 2013). In current research, there has been a lack of data on students' perspectives as they create online identities. Researchers described the *after*, whereas there has been a gap in understanding the *before*, what students think as they are creating online identities. Prior to this study, no such research existed, especially for working high school graduates, who comprise the target audience for this study. A better understanding of the before may help educators address the actual perspectives of students. The data from this study showed a gap in the thinking process during online identity creation. Teachers can use this awareness of the gap toward preparing students in Grades K-12 on best practices for creating online identities. This process, in turn, can lend to helping educators teach about self in the online world of Web 2.0.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the perspectives of working high school graduates regarding the creation of online identities. Understanding their perspectives offers data toward the start of a foundation for educators to teach and frame educational technologies that use online identities. The exploratory nature of this study provided initial findings. Future in-depth studies can help confirm these findings and build upon them. The overall intention was to benefit students who use online identities by helping them use the technologies in a safe, effective, and ethical manner. The audience of this study is middle and high school educators, who can use the data from this study to inform their educational practices that involve online identities.

Research Question

The primary research question was as follows: What are high school graduates' perceptions or viewpoints about creating online identities? Supporting subquestions were the following:

1. What are their perceptions of the definition and concept of an online identity?
2. What types of online identities do they identify that they create and for what purposes?
3. What types of thought processes do they encounter as they create these identities?
4. How have their purposes lined up with their intended results?
5. What stories do they have to share about their experiences or the experiences of others with the creation of online identities?

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework provided the foundation for this study because the research question and purpose of the study probed into a new area (Laureate Education, Inc., 2008) of online identity and looked toward understanding perspectives. The conceptual framework followed Maxwell's (2013) conceptive model. Maxwell recommended creating a study based on past and present factors regarding the study's main topic, including assumptions, beliefs, and theories that surround the study's concept. Theories used in the related literature, as outlined in Chapter 2, include Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development, Marcia's (1966) identity formation, Goffman's (1959) identity construction through human interaction, Butler's (1990) theory of performativity,

and, more commonly, Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory. After the formation of those theories, theories of computer-mediated communication (CMC; Walther, 2011) came to the forefront to address the age of technology. The concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories for this study that built the foundation of the conceptual framework stemmed from a combination of Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory and CMC theory. Four areas in the literature contributed to the rest of the structure by adding concepts, assumptions, expectations, and beliefs to the framework. Those four areas were current problems, concerns, advocates, and a sample model. Because the research question aimed to understand a perspective, this contextual lens provided the focus, the related research, and the context for understanding the users' views regarding online identity creation. Chapter 2 describes this framework in detail.

Nature of the Study

The methodology for the study was Smith, Flowers, and Larkin’s (2009) interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). An IPA approach provided exploratory findings. The intent of a phenomenological study is to offer possible insights that help people understand and connect human behavior with the world (Van Manen, 2009). Van Manen (2009) described phenomenology as learning about the nature of an individual's experience. Smith et al.’s (2009) IPA method focuses on a person’s interpretation of the experience. Learning about high school graduates’ interpretations of their experiences in creating online identities was the goal of this study and aligned with the IPA approach.

The general basis of the phenomenological approach to this study followed the model of previous researchers (e.g., Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Raccanello, 2011;

Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008) who aimed to understand users' perspectives toward actions resulting from online technology usage. The conceptual framework section of Chapter 2 outlines how these three studies helped to model the framework of this study.

The data collection tool for this study was the interview process. The purpose of this study was to add knowledge to the field, as opposed to evaluating a program, improving a program, or solving a problem (Patton, 2015). Adding knowledge means understanding a phenomenon or the meaning behind it (Creswell, 2013). To understand a phenomenon and a person's interpretation, a researcher needs to know the participants' feelings, thoughts, and intentions (Smith et al., 2009). These aspects are not observable or found in a document (Patton, 2015). The interview process, recommended by Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA approach, was an effective method of gaining an interpretation of an experience, particularly through a first-person viewpoint (Smith et al., 2009). As the researcher, I conducted nine one-on-one interviews in a face-to-face environment.

The data analysis strategy stemmed from recommendations by Creswell (2013), Maxwell (2013), and Patton (2015). Their suggested approaches aligned with Smith et al.'s (2009) steps for performing a data analysis for IPA studies. Maxwell recommended a process of small and natural steps to make the data analysis process manageable. To create small steps, I combined the suggestions from the researchers named above into a step-by-step data analysis plan, outlined in Chapter 3.

Definition of Terms

Blog: The term blog is a nickname for *Web log*. A blog is a personal or professional journal posted online (Christensson, 2013).

Cyberbullying: Cyberbullying is an act of purposeful and repeated harm on a person or persons through the use technological devices such as computers and cell phones (Patchin & Hinduja, 2013). Other synonymous terms for cyberbullying include *online bullying*, *digital bullying*, *Internet bullying*, and *electronic bullying*.

Cyberethics: Cyberethics is a philosophical study of moral, legal, and social responsibilities of technology users, as it pertains to the use of computers, computer networks, technology, and the Internet. A facet of cyberethics is the impact of online actions on individuals, groups, and institutions (Farjami, 2012; Thomas & Ahyick, 2010). There is still much debate on whether cyberethics is a separate study from general social ethics or if cyberethics falls under the same realm of the concept of ethics (Wankel & Malleck, 2010).

Digital citizenship: Digital citizenship is the concept and behaviors that students need to employ to be productive members in the technological world. Concepts include safety, security, ethical, and legal aspects (Hollandsworth et al., 2011; National Cyber Security Alliance, 2011; Ribble, 2012).

E-commerce: E-commerce is an abbreviation for *electronic commerce* and refers to sales and shopping that occurs over the Internet. Two primary methods of e-commerce are sales from a business entity to another business entity (B2B) and sales from a business entity to a consumer (B2C; Christensson, 2013).

Millennial student: A millennial student is someone born between the years of 1982 to 2004 and has particular traits such as being team oriented, sheltered, and confident (Howe & Strauss, 2000). In today's literature, the term has often referred to those students enrolled in college after the year 2000 (Carlson, 2005).

Online identity: This is the identity that a user creates in order to have a presence or interaction in an online platform or virtual community. Online identities can be real, false, anonymous, or embellished (Giang, 2010; Hordila-Vatamanescu & Pana, 2010). In some cases, an online identity can be a result of what others post online about a person (Schmidt & Cohen, 2013).

Social networking: Social networking is a face-to-face activity; however, online social networking refers to people who network in the electronic, Web-based environment. In general, people use an online social networking platform to communicate and connect with others who have similar interests or shared commonalities (Wiederhold, 2010).

Virtual population: As the number of physical bodies on earth creates the earth's population, the number of online identities creates the virtual population. Because one person can have more than one identity online, the virtual population could outnumber the earth's population of physical bodies (Schmidt & Cohen, 2013).

Assumptions

There were three assumptions for this study. The first assumption was the philosophical perspective of constructivism and the ontological nature of how one creates his or her reality. The assumption was that individuals created their reality as they

interacted with the social world and that there is no single reality (Merriam, 1997; Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). This study of the realities of different individuals resulted in seeing a larger picture (Schwandt et al., 2007), differences in experiences, and an emergence of patterns (Moustakas, 1994; Simon, 2011). Those results helped develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Simon, 2011). A second assumption was that high school graduates were an ideal population for this study. Because the goal was to help address the nuances and possible teachings regarding online identity in Grades K-12, the assumption was that recent high school graduates provided useful feedback. A third assumption was that the participants gave honest answers. The interviews were confidential and voluntary to encourage truthfulness. Participants were aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Despite those privacy accommodations, if the participants provided fabricated or false answers, then the data from the study would not provide an accurate understanding of their perspectives.

Scope and Delimitations

The goal of this research study was to examine the perspective of high school graduates to understand their mindset before or during the process of online identity creation. This aspect of the research problem was the focus of the study for two primary reasons. First, there is a lack of data on this perspective. Second, the use of online identities is becoming increasingly more relevant than ever before in education and applications in the adult world. Other areas of online identity are also in need of further research and more data, such as the after effects of having an online identity. Chapter 2

outlines some of these areas. This research project focused on the before perspective of high school students because of the larger gap in the research (see Chapter 2).

The high school graduates in this study recently completed the K-12 experience; therefore, their experiences in creating online identities in Grades K-12 were recent. As discussed in the Assumptions section, an assumption of this study was that K-12 experiences play a contributing role in how high school graduates approached online identities. The age range of the population, therefore, was recent high school graduates ages 18 to 21. The participants in this study were graduates employed in the retail industry.

The choice of this population was a result of three areas of consideration. First, a delimited population maintained a manageable and focused study. There were variables that were not included in this study, such as whether the job was a part-time or full-time position, the various business industries, and whether the graduates were college bound or not. Addressing every potential variable would have resulted in a scope that is too broad and ineffective (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Because this study was a starting point for delving into this area of understanding the perspectives of online identity creation, the population selection had limited variables.

Second, the choice of studying working high school graduates stemmed from a need identified in the literature and the consideration of the statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014a). A number of researchers used university students for their population (e.g., Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Giang, 2010; Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; O’Hara, 2011; Raccanello, 2011; Walther et al, 2011).

There was a lack of research regarding online identities, particularly with a population of recent high school graduates who were working and not necessarily enrolled in a university. There is a growing importance in the area of the use of social networking and the need for social networking skills in the business world. Henry and Venkatraman (2013) and Siegle (2011) focused on the relationship of the effect of educational curriculum on students going into the working world. The researchers specifically addressed the need for incorporating social networking skills in the business realm. Finally, there has been a gradual, 5-year decline in the percent of recent high school graduates going to college (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014a). The college-bound rate in October 2013 was the lowest rate in the past decade (U.S Department of Labor, 2014a). As of 2014, recent high school graduates who were not college bound represented approximately 45% of high school graduates in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014a).

The third factor related to the chosen industry of retail. There did not appear to be any research on online identities and a particular business industry for recent high school graduates. The literature regarding noncollege-bound high school graduates and their employment covers general statistics such as race, family income, and neighborhood status (e.g., McDaniel & Keuhn, 2013). Other areas include employment within specific populations, such as those with disabilities (e.g., Hartwig & Sitlington, 2008). Because there was no particular industry identified in the literature, the choice of the retail industry stemmed from two factors. The two factors were Bozick's (2009) warehouse hypothesis and two statistics that fed Bozick's hypothesis.

Bozick’s (2009) warehouse theory states that an area with low unemployment and high job opportunities would render high school graduates to be more likely to go directly into employment rather than to college. The U.S. unemployment rate has steadily decreased over the last 5 years, and the unemployment rate in the northeast region of the U.S has been below the national average (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014b). Lockard and Wolf (2012) projected a 10% to 12% increase in the food serving and sales industry, which collectively is the retail industry. Applying these two statistics to Bozick’s hypothesis creates a projected increase of high school graduates going into the retail industry. Bozick’s hypothesis also may explain the decrease in college enrollment, as mentioned in the previous paragraph.

A final reason for the choice of the retail industry was my relationship with business owners in the northeastern part of the United States. The owners allowed me to approach their employees for participation in this study.

The results of the study may be transferable to other similar situations with high school graduates in the same age group with the same post-high school choices. Chapter 3 provides further information on the issue of transferability.

In terms of the scope and delimitations for the conceptual framework, the two theories chosen to build the foundation were Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory and Walther's (2011) CMC theory. There were a number of other theories that could have contributed to the theoretical basis for this study, such as Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stages and Marcia's (1966) identity achievement theory. Tajfel and Turner's theory, however, deals directly with the social aspect of identity development. Because

the online platform unites people into a social, yet virtual, community, Tajfel and Turner's social development theory provided a closer link to the online identity concept than did the other options. Walther's theory added the technology perspective to the foundational identity theory. Chapter 2 addresses this in further detail.

Limitations

The limitations of this study included elements of the researcher, the participants, and the data collected.

The Researcher

The nature of human psychology and human interaction is not a defined, perfect science. Patton (2015) cautioned researchers on the effect of a researcher's presence. I took steps to ensure the comfort and trust of the participants. Regardless, my presence was an inevitable part of how the participants reacted. Additionally, as the researcher, I came to this study with some biases. I believe that students need help with using online technologies in a safe and ethical manner. I also contend that the concept of an online identity slowly seeped its way into students' existence. This gradual permeation may have produced a state where students created online identities without much thought or preplanning. The creation of open-ended, nonleading questions helped deter my biases from appearing in the interview questions.

The Participants

Limitations also included the sample selection and the human factor of the participants. The sample selection was high school graduates, ages 18 to 21, working in the retail industry. The results may or may not extend to all working high school

graduates, nonworking graduates, or to graduates outside of the specified age range. Further, participants may have behaved atypically during the interview, or they may have had a current situation in their lives that affected their answers (Patton, 2015). Developing trust and rapport with each participant helped alleviate this limitation as much as possible. I ensured confidentiality to assist in attaining honest responses. As described in Chapter 3, the interviews occurred via face-to-face conversations. Because the topic of online identities often involves a non-face-to-face platform, the face-to-face interview approach may have generated limited responses. A future study may include interviews via a non-face-to-face platform.

The Data

While I did record the answers to the questions, it was not possible to observe or record the actual thought of the participants (Patton, 2015). Further, I could not observe past behaviors or past thinking processes (Patton, 2015) for when they created their online identities. Questions that ask about a past action may not capture the actual answers from the past intentions. Another limitation of the data is that the data may not be generalizable to other students or situations. Researchers must heed caution in generalizing data from purposeful samples (Patton, 2015).

Significance

The results of this study add insight in helping students live in the world where predictions indicate that the online population will outnumber earth's population (Schmidt & Cohen, 2013). The qualitative nature of this study did not imply an intention to find answers but rather to discover patterns. Educators can include the data gathered

from these identified trends toward preparing students to be effective members of digital communities (Hollandsworth et al., 2011). Kaufman, Oakley-Browne, Watkins, and Leigh (2003) recommended using a model of micro-, macro-, and megalevels to describe potential outcomes. Using their model, the practical, microapplication of this study promotes sound uses of educational technologies that require online identities. On a macrolevel, schools may be able to develop practical teaching methods that are relevant for the Web 2.0 era (DeVoe, 2009; Ohler, 2011; Torp & Nevalainen, 2010). The megasocietal impact is the effect education will have in the world where the online population outnumbers earth’s population (Schmidt & Cohen, 2013). If educators help students create online identities with ethical, legal, and effective practices in mind, they will contribute to building a balanced digital community (Ohler, 2011). Another potential megaoutcome is a reduction in the reported statistics about cybercrime related to online identities, as stated in an earlier section of this chapter and Chapter 2. These three outcomes are the contributors to social change to help students, schools, and society thrive safely and ethically in the environment populated with online identities.

On the megalevel, while there may not be any laws about the creation of online identities, the legal considerations encompass the misuse of online identities. In comparison to the amount of online activity, use, and services, government regulation is minimal (Lund, 2012). More attention, however, has been developing around the topic of managing digital identities (Smedinghoff, 2012). Online identity management is growing in importance as a fundamental basis for the online economy. Government and private groups are developing legal guidance to address the challenges that come hand in hand

with these identities (Smedinghoff, 2012). This study alone does not solve the problems associated with online identities; however, the results of this study serve as a piece of the puzzle toward helping address the challenges.

Summary and Transition

Online identity is a reality of using educational technologies in the classroom and adult life beyond the school years. This interview-style, IPA study examined the perspective of high school graduates, ages 18 to 21, who were working in the retail industry, regarding their creation of online identities. The results inform the before aspect of creating online identities, as opposed to the after aspects or effects. There has been some literature on the varying after aspects but little research on the before aspect. The evaluation of this literature is the content of the next chapter. Chapter 2 provides the strategy and content of the literature review, as well as a discussion of the conceptual framework for the study. In the end, the results of this study add an element of depth to the landscape of the literature. The results can help students with their online identities, as their entire life and identity from birth to death will be on a worldwide platform (Schmidt & Cohen, 2013).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to address the conceptual framework and literature review for this study. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the perspectives of working, high school graduates regarding the creation of online identities. This goal addresses the hidden and not-so-hidden curriculum standards to help students use best practices when creating online identities. The hidden curriculum is the teaching and learning that occurs, which is within the curriculum, but is not openly stated or acknowledged in written standards (Goddard, 2002; Posner & Strike, 1974). Çubukçu (2012) said that the hidden curriculum includes the daily activities that occur during school hours. These actions contribute to the development of such traits as values, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as such skills as interpersonal communication. The term *not-so-hidden*, in this context, refers to the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) standards for students (ISTE, 2014a) and teachers (ISTE, 2014b). Not every school may follow these standards, but the standards hold recognition by many schools internationally. Both documents call for the incorporation of digital citizenship and responsible behavior in social interactions using technology. The discovery from this study helps to provide data that educators can use to teach and frame the use of online identities, addressing ISTE's standards and the values within the hidden curriculum.

The first part of this chapter describes the strategy used for the literature review. During the literature review, a conceptual framework stemmed from the resulting search and analysis of the relevant studies. The conceptual framework shapes the next section of this chapter. Finally, a review of the literature follows. The two primary themes in the

related literature are the problems and concerns with online identities and the after effects of online identities. The gap is the lack of understanding the before thought process in creating online identities.

Literature Review Search Strategy

Three elements framed the search strategy for the literature review. These components were the search criteria, the search engines, and the use of reference lists from identified studies.

Search Criteria

- Peer-reviewed journal: All searches were within peer-reviewed journals.
- Five-year history: The search criterion was for articles written in the past 5 years. The search and writing process for this literature review began in 2012. At that time, some articles contained a 2008 and 2009 publication date. Updated searches continued; however, a few resources from 2008 and 2009 still contain relevant information and remain in the literature review.
- Keyword search: For all the database searches, using the peer-reviewed, 5-year criteria, keywords included *online identity creation*, *creating online identity*, *virtual identity creation,* and *creating virtual identity*. Those parameters produced limited results; therefore, the search excluded the terms *creation* and *creating*, thus searching *online identity* and *virtual identity*. Because most of the articles related to online social networking, the search later included *online social networking* to find if there were any further

relevant research studies. Another search included the term *avatar* in connection with the term *presentation of self*.

Search Engines

Three primary search engines provided the literature results.

- Walden University Library: The first search performed was within the Walden University's online library database, which uses the Ebsco Host search engine. The first search was within databases that included the following educational journals:
    - Academic Search Complete
    - Academic Search Alumni Edition
    - Education Research Complete
    - ERIC
    - MAS Ultra-School Edition
    - Primary Search
    - Research Starters - Education
    - Teacher Reference Center

Because online identity affects businesses and social behavior, the next step of the search extended to the following databases, to ensure full coverage:

- Business Source Complete
- Communication & Mass Media Complete
- Computers & Applied Sciences Complete
- eBook Collection

   - Health and Psychosocial Instruments
   - PsycARTICLES
   - PsycBOOKS
   - PsycEXTRA
   - PsycINFO
   - Regional Business News
   - SocINDEX with Full Text
   - PsycTESTS
   - International Security & Counter Terrorism Reference Center
   - Humanities Source
- Science Direct: Some of the above results did not include full-text files. A search for full-text files led to the Science Direct (2014) database website. This website is a scientific database that contains over 11 million peer-reviewed, full-text articles and book chapters (Science Direct, 2014). All identified articles passed the verification process for peer-reviewed status.
- ProQuest Dissertation Search Engine: Because the introduction of Web 2.0 has changed the capabilities of online identities, as discussed in Chapter 1, there may be current research that is unpublished in peer-reviewed journals. Such research would include empirical studies conducted in dissertations. The ProQuest Dissertation search engine, available from the Walden University Library, provided additional studies for the literature review.

Reference Lists

The reference lists from each identified study, from the above searches, contained related literature. Vetting the reference lists with the search parameters, as listed earlier in this section, resulted in additional relevant articles. Of interest to note, most references listed were beyond the 5-year criteria. The most recent study conducted by Davis (2013) contained 79 references. While there were 13 references dated within the past 5 years, only two of those articles were relevant to the topic. The limited results reinforce the relative newness of the research on online identity in the Web 2.0 era.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study stemmed from Miles and Huberman's (1994) and Maxwell's (2013) suggested framework. Their structures consisted of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories found in the literature. These components support and inform the research and align with the methodology.

The concept of online identity is not new. There are studies published in peer-reviewed journals from the 1980s such as Myers's (1987) study on online identities within an electronic bulletin board environment. In the realm of this study, the relative newness of the concept of online identity stems from the potential uses that Web 2.0 introduced. When advanced online technological capabilities launched in the early 2000s, the Internet environment offered a new generation of opportunities, which spawned the term Web 2.0. The capabilities of Web 2.0 changed the face of the Internet from being a database of information to being a dynamically changing platform (Downes, 2005). The Internet became a place for collective collaboration, dynamic editing by many, and

sharing information with a limitless number of users (Downes, 2005). This change meant that applications enabled users to be community based, social, interactive, and self-expressive, while employing user-created, customized content with media-rich options (Skiba, 2006). In the educational literature, there are a few early adopters of Web 2.0, such as Bergin's (2002) discussion of teaching with wikis. The majority of studies and conversations about Web 2.0 in the classroom began after 2005 (e.g., Parker & Chao, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2007; Skiba, 2006). Web 2.0 introduced an innovative way to use and create online identities. This new way is currently less than a decade old. This latest concept of online identity, created with the launch of Web 2.0, was the basis for building the conceptual framework for this study.

Figure 1 shows a visualization of the conceptual framework, using Maxwell's (2013) structure of building a system of concepts, assumptions, and beliefs on a theoretical foundation. The top of the concept map shows the alignment of the chosen methodology with the conceptual framework. The next sections describe the parts of Figure 1.

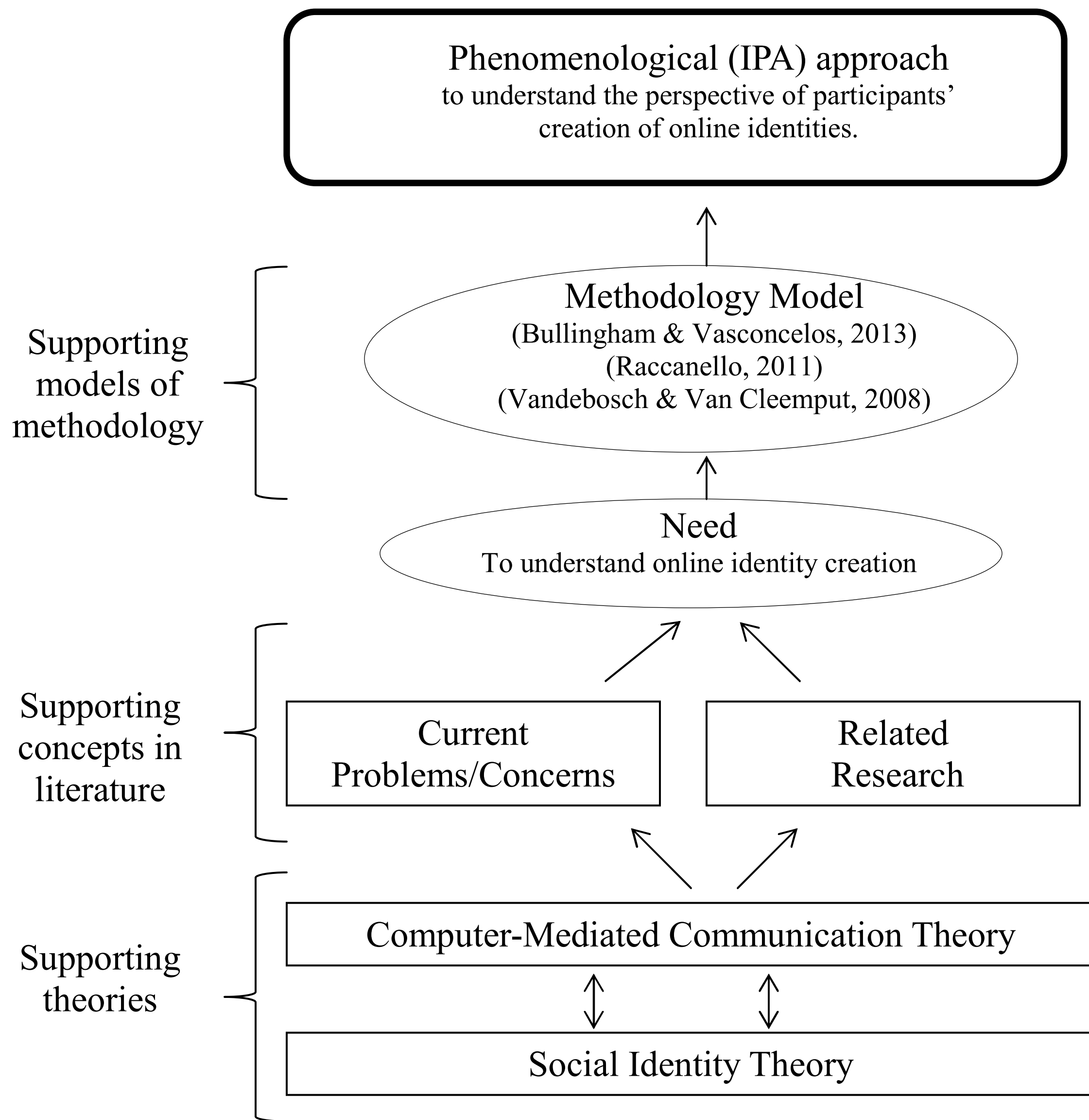


Figure 1. Concept map for conceptual framework.

Supporting Theories

Two theories provided the foundation of the conceptual framework for this study. Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory and the basis of Walther's (2011) CMC theory created a building block that produced a dual-perspective approach. The first perspective, social identity theory, came before the widespread use of technology in education. Social identity theory is the basis of studies regarding topics both within and outside of a technology environment. It is also necessary to blend in digital considerations into the theoretical base. Rice and Gattiker (2001) stated that online communication differs from face-to-face communication due to many factors such as synchronicity, reduction of interactivity, and time and space elements. The second perspective, then, is Walther's CMC theory, which addresses the aspects and effects that technology has on communication, particularly those aspects that are different from a face-to-face environment. Two primary differences, as discussed by Walther, are the lack of social presence and nonverbal cues. Each of the two theories provided a piece of the groundwork for building the conceptual framework (Figure 1).

Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory describes how a person will choose to behave in order to be part of an in-group, as perceived by the individual. The individual's perception is about the group's reputation, the individual's membership status within that group, and the group's reputation in contrast to other comparable groups. Kim, Zheng, and Gupta's (2011) research, discussed in the next section, is another example of a study regarding online identity, where Kim et al. used social identity theory as a foundational framework. Tajfel and Turner's theory of intergroup relations is reputable in

social psychology. A citation analysis of their work showed over 1,500 citations in five leading social psychology journals (Dumont & Louw, 2009). Part of Tajfel and Turner's theory is the ability for people to be part of multiple groups depending on certain characteristics and traits that they choose to expose or portray more dominantly. This feature presents a tie to CMC theory that is relevant for this study.

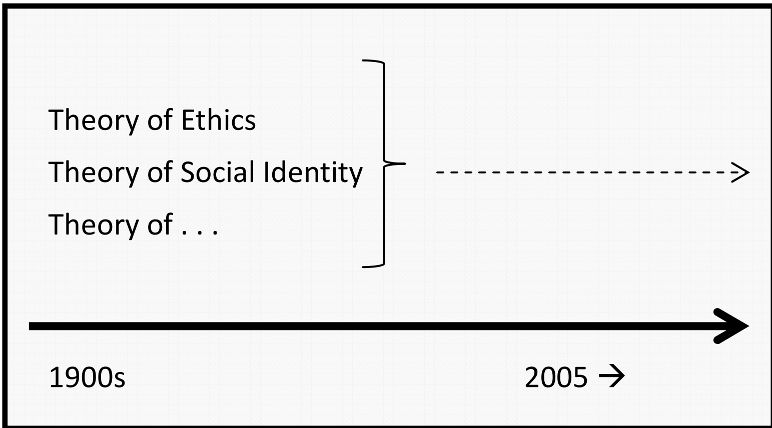
There are several theories within CMC (Walther, 2011), including the cues-filtered-out theory, which built the primary theoretical foundation for this framework. According to Walther (2011), Culnan and Markus (1987) coined the phrase *cues filtered out* to address the lack of nonverbal cues in electronic communication. Walther stated that cues-filtered-out theories address how CMC blocks the ability for online users to develop some social functions that rely on the use of nonverbal cues. Walther also tied this back into Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory. Walther said that the cues-filtered-out factor plays a role on how a person creates their identity to project themselves into the in-group or out-of-group dynamics of Tajfel and Turner's theory. The lack of nonverbal and social context cues that are present in a face-to-face environment allows the giver or receiver of a computer-mediated message to adjust the intent of the communication. Both parties can overexaggerate or discount any components of a message or any traits of the message giver. This changeable feature presents the relevant link to Tajfel and Turner's explanation of the ability to be part of multiple groups. A person can choose which traits to portray dominantly and which traits to exclude in any online social groups. Likewise, the others in that group can read the person's attributes in an exaggerated or discounted fashion. Walther confirmed this action of bias portraying of

traits and bias perception of traits in a number of studies on identity, self-presentation, and perceived identity (e.g., Walther, 1995; Walther et al., 2011; Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2009).

It is relevant to note a concept that emerged from linking social identity theory to CMC. As mentioned earlier, a study on online identity creation should lay upon a theoretical foundation based on both a theory of human behavior and a theory based on the new opportunities presented by technology. When examining classic theories in the light of the technological age of the new millennium, studies have brought questions about *new* versus *classic* to the surface. Classic theories may not apply to the new-millennium environment. In this case, a social identity theory such as Tajfel and Turner's (1986), developed in the 1980s, may not apply to the new environment of the online world in 2005 and beyond. Cover (2012) also presented the potential incompatibility issue of online performative activities and classic identity theories. Cover said that contemporary individuals might be entering a new phase that needs an updated framework to address the different nuances of online identity.

This uncertainty about new versus classic is similar to the same debated issue if classic theories of ethics apply to ethics in the online world. Some authors have questioned if offline and online ethics are the same concept or if they belong in two separate categories (e.g., Johnson, 1997; Wankel & Malleck, 2010). Answering this question was not the goal of this study. The purpose of exposing this question is to add this thought process to the lens when looking at the conceptual framework. While Tajfel and Turner's (1986) theory is part of the framework, it is necessary to consider the fit and

timeline of new technology and the theories created during the pretechnology age. Figure 2 illustrates the question if the classic theories apply to the new online, millennium environment or if the online world may need new theories.



versus

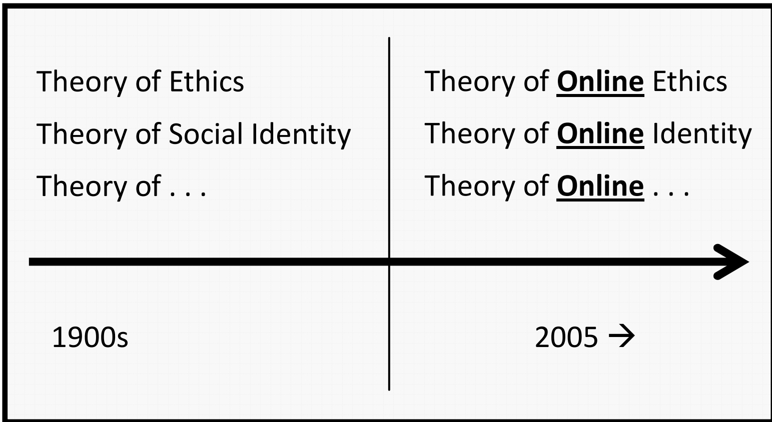


Figure 2. Classic theories versus online theories to address the new-millennium environment.

Other Identity Development Theories

There were other theories on identity development considered for this study's theoretical foundation. Some of these theories surfaced during the peer-review literature search. For example, Raccanello (2011) studied text interpretation, identity, and online imagination with social networking. Raccanello used anthropology as the theoretical foundation for his study. The goal of his study was to understand traits and behavior of the online social networking culture. Anthropology theory helps to determine the influence of societal norms on behaviors and the actions that cultures adopt to support needs (Raccanello, 2011). Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) used Goffman's (1959) framework of identity construction, which uses concepts from dramaturgy. The goal of their study was to compare the presentation of one's online self to that of Goffman's theory of presentation of self. Other identity-related theories in the literature include Erikson (1968) and Marcia's (1966) theories. For example, Giang's (2010) study used both Erikson and Marcia's theories as a foundation, but the study focused on online anonymity, disparity from offline character, and online self-disclosure. Usita (2010) also found Erikson and Marcia's theories to be a sound theoretical base, but again, Usita's focus was different from the topic of this dissertation's study. Usita studied the effect of online identity on one's identity.

In those studies mentioned above, the choices of theoretical foundations were appropriate for the purposes of the respective studies, but those theories may not be as suitable to build the foundation of the topic of this dissertation. Anthropology, as studied by Raccanello (2011) covers the larger picture of a culture, which may be too broad for

the narrow topic of creating online identities. Erikson (1968) and Marcia's (1966) theories, as used by Giang (2010) and Usita (2010), may be applicable, but the focus of those studies was different. Giang and Usita's focal point was on the statuses and stages of psychosocial development in ego, identity formation, and personality. Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, on the other hand, brings in concept of identity formation based on social interactions. Barrett and Oppenheimer's (2011) description of Tajfel and Turner's theory pinpoints the relevance of social identity theory for this study. Social identity theory is more about how circumstances affect identity rather than age-linked developmental processes.

Supporting Concepts in the Literature

Social identity and CMC theories created the foundation of this study. Those two theories do not provide a complete framework. The newness in understanding the phenomenon of online identity creation warrants other supporting elements. Three areas in the literature built the rest of the framework by adding concepts, assumptions, expectations, and beliefs to the structure (Figure 1). Those three areas are current problems and concerns, related research, and a sample model. Figure 1 shows how the literature discussion pointed to the need or gap in understanding online identity creation. The methodology that aligned with filling this gap stemmed from the premise of the phenomenological approach in the three model studies that addressed a similar need.

Supporting the Methodology with Three Model Studies

As described an in earlier section of this paper, an updated concept of online identity came with the launch of Web 2.0. Schmidt and Cohen's (2013) forecasting of the

growth of online identities to outnumber the actual population supports the new nature of the concept of online identity. This newer concept presents a challenge in identifying an approach to studying online identities. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) conducted a study that addressed this challenge. Bullingham and Vasconcelos examined the presentation of self and online interactions through the lens of online identity. The researchers expressed the need to gather rich data due to the intricacies of the concept of online identity. Collecting such data means understanding user opinions, perceptions, and viewpoints (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Bullingham and Vasconcelos gathered their rich data through personal, one-on-one interviews with 10 participants. Their study's phenomenological approach was one of the supporting models for this dissertation's methodology, and the approach aligns with the conceptual framework (Figure 1). Chapter 3 contains more detail on the methodology, and the next section on Literature Review details the results of Bullingham and Vasconcelos's study.

Two other related studies also used a similar approach. Raccanello (2011) conducted qualitative interviews with 10 participants to gather data on how social networking sites affect identity, interpretation of others' identity, and imagination. Vandebosch and Van Cleemput's (2008) used a qualitative interview and focus group method to learn about the perceptions of youngsters, students ages 10 to 18 years old, regarding cyberbullying. All three sets of researchers, Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013), Raccanello, and Vandebosch and Van Cleemput, used a qualitative interview approach. The study conducted for this dissertation had the same data objectives as those three research projects. The data objectives were to gain insight, conduct an exploratory

study, and gather a range of opinions on a complex topic. These actions would result in an understanding of the perceptions of the participants. The three sets of researchers did not specifically mention the use of the IPA approach; however, their use of interviews and their data collection goals closely align with the IPA approach. The three studies are a model for using a phenomenological approach toward understanding perceptions and interpretations in the area of online identity. The IPA approach takes the general phenomenology methodology and places a focus on a particular concept, in a particular situation, with a particular population (Smith et al., 2009). These elements of the IPA approach matched the goal of this study. Chapter 3 provides information on the match between the IPA approach and this study's goal.

Literature Review

Current literature on online identity covers multiple areas, intentions, and ages. The review for this study focused on areas directly related to the purpose of the study, which is to understand high school graduates' perspectives regarding online identity creation. Chapter 1 contained an introduction to four general themes and four specific topics regarding online identities. This section first covers the four general themes of education, social interaction, adult citizenship, and dangers. Then, as part of the conceptual framework, a discussion of the problems and concerns stated in the literature follows. The last section encompasses the four specific topics of logistics, anonymity, avatars, and the social aspect.

Four General Themes on Online Identity

Four general themes emerged from a review of the literature on online identities. Other themes exist, but they do not relate directly to this research topic. The four main themes relevant to this study are online identities as they relate to education, online social interaction, adult citizenship, and possible dangers. These topics are necessary to address because they have a bearing on the larger picture of online identities. The first theme addresses how education uses online identities, making it closely tied to education. The other three themes, while not directly related to education, still affect students' lives as they progress through school and become adult citizens in society.

Online identities related to education. The topic of education relates to online identities ranging from e-mail accounts to school-subject-specific roles and online interactions. For example, O'Hara (2011) transferred the concept of *mathematical identity* to the online world. O'Hara defined mathematical identity from a dual perspective. Mathematical identity is both how a student feels as a learner of math as well as how learning math affects the development of a student's identity (O'Hara, 2011). Previous research has acknowledged mathematical identity in the classroom but not within the online environment (O'Hara, 2011). In her qualitative study of 17 high school students in both public and private schools, O'Hara found that their online mathematical identity affected their accountability, empowerment, and collaborative abilities toward solving math problems. Other research addressing similar education-related online identities include online language learning (Chang, 2010), self-presentation through avatars

(Vasalou & Joinson, 2009), and online role play for learning (Doerr-Stevens, 2011). These are only a few examples of the classroom incorporation of online identities.

Online identities related to online social interaction. The social interaction aspect of online identity overlaps in some areas with educational uses. A recurring platform on the social interaction side is the use of social networking websites such as Facebook. An example of the overlap in education is DeVoe's (2009) recommendation for librarians to show themselves on social networking sites intentionally. The purpose of this intentional use is to provide a library reference and interactive resource for students using a platform already accepted by the students. Another example is Knight and Rochon's (2012) suggestion for the use of social networking sites to help students transition to higher education. Through their study, they found the use of the social networking sites to be more effective for emotional and social connectivity rather than for academic guidance. The value of their study was the unexpected results. Students naturally depended on and leaned on social networking sites for emotional and social support. The unexpected aspect was learning that students did not use social networking sites as much for gaining knowledge, data, or information in comparison to emotional and social support. The implication here is that, while the social aspect of social networking sites may be outside of the classroom, the use and existence of such sites naturally blends into the classroom. Even further, though, are suggestions to utilize this powerful tool to the benefit of education, such as for transitioning to higher education or a library reference site.

Knight and Rochon's (2012) findings tie into the concept that a social networking site can define a person's online identity or at least one type of online identity. Cover (2012) demonstrated how a student's engagement in social networking develops and stabilizes his or her online identity. Cover used Butler's (1990) theory of identity performativity to show how online identity is an ongoing process. This process occurs and changes through many activities such as sharing personal experiences, playing out roles, and identifying interests (Cover, 2012). Greenhow and Robelia (2009) also concluded that students use social networking sites for self-discovery and identity development as they learn who they are and who they are becoming. The participants in their qualitative study were high school students.

Online identities related to an adult citizen. Learning about online identity cannot only be about life while in school but also needs to address one’s life beyond the school years. Because education prepares students for adulthood, knowledge of online identities as adults is also relevant. One popular use of online identity outside of education is e-commerce. E-commerce, in this instance, is referring to business-to-consumer (B2C) shopping, not business-to-business (B2B) shopping and is not limited to just adults. The estimated number of online B2C shoppers in the U.S. in 2010 was 137 million (Kril, 2013). Kril (2013) estimated this figure to rise to 175 million shoppers in the U.S. by 2016. Looking at the U.S. Census Bureau (2013) statistics for 2012, these numbers equate to affecting between 50-75% of adults in the U.S.

Online shopping involves a type of online identity. Coverdale (2010) showed the effects of social identity on online shopping for women. Coverdale used Tajfel and

Turner's (1986) social identity theory as the basis of how women perceive their identity in a social situation within the online shopping realm. The details of the study are beyond the realm of this topic, but the study does show a connection between online identity and online shopping, an activity that will affect 175 million people in the U.S. by 2016 (Kril, 2013).

Another example of online identity use in adulthood is how it pertains to professional blogs. Kedrowicz and Sullivan (2012) studied professional blogs for engineers. The findings of their study pointed to the need for professionals to manage their online identities. The researchers concluded that professional bloggers needed to consider how they appeared to those with whom they engage in their blogs.

Blogs and e-commerce are only two examples from a list of potential adult online identities. Other types of online identity include multiple logins for various identity reasons (Ovadia, 2010). Some of the uses include gaming, dating (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009), and specific group memberships such as cultural (Oviedo, 2013), political, religious, or gender-based groups (Mathews, 2010). All of these cited researchers related their research to the topic of online identity.

Online identities related to possible dangers. Online crime and danger have a connection to online identities. In some instances, the creation of anonymous or false online identities has led to intentional or unintentional crime and danger. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) produces an annual report from the Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) that lists the major intentional online crimes committed and reported each year. With almost three million complaints since its inception in 2000, the

IC3 reported that in 2012, there were about 300,000 complaints that amounted to over a half a billion dollars in loss (FBI, 2012). Common types of reported crimes include auto sale fraud, e-mail scams, intimidation scams, romance scams, real estate scams, credit card theft, and identity theft. Many of these crimes can affect students because 93% of teenagers, ages 12 to17, spend time online (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2013a).

While the crimes in the FBI (2012) report may affect adults more than children, there are specific crimes that directly relate to students, such as online predators. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (2013a), sexual predators who approach children online do attempt to meet the victim in a face-to-face environment. The element of online identity plays a role in this danger, particularly because 27% of teenagers engage in online games with strangers (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2013b).

Another widely known danger in the online world, for students, is cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Del Rey, Elipe, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2012; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Smith, 2009; Smith et al., 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). The next section covers this topic further because cyberbullying relates closely to educational settings and K-12 students. Cyberbullying is prevalent. One in three teenagers, ages 12 to 17, experience some form of online harassment (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2013b). The majority of cases are from known peers rather than from strangers (McQuade & Sampat, 2008). McQuade and Sampat (2008) surveyed over 40,000 students and found that 84% of the victims knew their perpetrator. Cyberbullying

is an issue because of the effects on the victims. A victim can experience a change in emotions such as embarrassment, low self-esteem, and fear. Other adverse effects include physical acts such as physical violence, suicide, and substance abuse (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011).

Problems and Concerns Stated in the Literature

The broad range of concerns, outlined in the previous paragraphs, is part of the general picture of the research on online identities. This section now provides a narrower lens to view this study’s focus on online identities and students. The topic of problems and concerns is part of the concept map in Figure 1. The literature on the concerns, related to students, centered on the issue of safety and possible adverse effects.

Paradise and Sullivan (2012) conducted a study with 357 undergraduates regarding adverse effects of the use of Facebook, a popular social networking site that requires an online identity. The purpose of their study was to tie Davidson's third-person effect theory to three situations using Facebook. Davidson's theory states that people tend to perceive a different level of influence of mass communication messages on themselves as opposed to others (Paradise & Sullivan, 2012). While the intention to tie the theory to the use of Facebook is not directly in alignment with the purpose of this dissertation's study, the content of Paradise and Sullivan's study identifies concerns with online identities in social networking pages. The researchers focused on the adverse effects of social networking sites such as those effects on personal relationships, future employment opportunities, and privacy. Participants found the latter two situations to be at a significantly greater risk for their closest friends than for themselves. Paradise and

Sullivan's conclusion included a discussion on how the results of the study relate to the risk of vulnerability to threats such as identity theft and harassment.

Social networking sites, such a Facebook, are a primary area of study in the realm of online identity and the related risks. Taraszow, Aristodemou, Shitta, Laouris, and Arsoy’s (2010) examined the personal, identifying data that users put on their Facebook pages. Taraszow et al. analyzed 131 Facebook profiles of users between the ages of 13 and 30. The results of their analysis showed that users create their identities online, through disclosing personal information, as well as photos, videos, music, and other postings. Users purposely choose to post the traits that will optimize their self-portrayal (Taraszow et al., 2010). These results correlate with the three areas of relationships, future employment, and privacy of Paradise and Sullivan's (2012) study. Taraszow et al. tied the results of their study to the literature regarding concerns about privacy, bullying, and other dangers. For example, anyone with access to a Facebook page can download another user's photos and post the photos on other websites completely out of context. Taraszow et al. provided a situation such as mixing a downloaded picture into a pornographic website. Another concern is the risk to privacy. Taraszow et al. found that 96.2% of the users provided full names, and 99.2% provided full birthdates. This disclosure, along with other personal information, makes a user vulnerable (Taraszow et al., 2010). When users also post home addresses, e-mail addresses, hometowns, and other personal information, they put themselves at risk for an attack on their privacy (Taraszow et al., 2010) and at risk for other problems such as cyberbullying (Walrave & Heirman, 2011). In the study by Taraszow et al., 76.3% of the users had their preferences set to a

private setting, as opposed to having their pages opened to the public. The issue, though, is that researchers have found that many Facebook users accept complete strangers as friends. These strangers consequently have access to a person's “private” Facebook page (Paradise & Sullivan, 2012; Taraszow et al., 2010). This easy access by strangers and the amount of personal data exposed increase the possibility of fraud, identity theft, and other such risks to privacy. The accessibility and availability of contact information also makes a person easily prone to physical and verbal harassment (Taraszow et al., 2010; Walrave & Heirman, 2011).

A common type of such harassment, covered in the literature, is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is an act of purposeful and repeated harm on a person or persons through the use technological devices such as computers and cell phones (Patchin & Hinduja, 2013). There is no recognized single definition of cyberbullying (Del Rey et al., 2012). In defining cyberbullying, there are three commonly agreed upon factors that constitute cyberbullying. These three aspects are intentionality, repetition, and a power imbalance (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Reports from different sources contain large variances in the predicted percentage of cyberbullying incidences. The U. S. Government's cyberbullying website reports that 16% of high school students are victims of cyberbullying (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.). Other studies show different percentages of victims, such as 24% (Patchin & Hinduja, 2013) and 72% (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Regardless of which report is accurate, the attention given to this topic represents cyberbullying’s prominent nature in schools.

In-depth coverage of cyberbullying is beyond the scope of the purpose of this literature review; however, the relevance of cyberbullying to this review is twofold. First, the topic of online identity includes anonymity and online identity development. A discussion of online identity and its relationship to anonymity and development follows in the next section of this chapter. In terms of cyberbullying, however, those two topics factor into reasons why perpetrators are more apt to bully online than in person (Walrave & Heirman, 2011). In a study with 1,318 adolescents, Walrave and Heirman (2011) found that adolescents who ventured into creating other identities were more likely to become perpetrators of cyberbullying. Similarly, König, Gollwitzer, and Steffgen (2010) found that the ability to create an anonymous online identity was a motivating factor in becoming a perpetrator of cyberbullying. Their study surveyed 473 students. Of those students, 179 were earlier victims of traditional bullying. Almost 84% of those once-bullied students became online bullies. The researchers theorized that such a high percentage of students became bullies because of the anxiety caused by a previous bullying attack and because of the need to balance their perceived scale of justice. According to König et al., these formerly bullied victims chose cyberbullying over traditional bullying because they felt this method of hiding behind anonymity would reduce the likelihood of retaliation.

The second relevance of cyberbullying to this review is the commonality of cyberbullying and online identities in studies with different purposes. Regardless of the various purposes and goals, studies on cyberbullying include references to online identity and vice versa. For example, cyberbullying is the focus of studies such as those

referenced in the above paragraphs, as well as studies conducted by Schenk and Fremouw (2011) and Sivashanker (2013). The purposes of these studies were:

- to predict the likelihood of cyberbullying, based on past behaviors (Walrave & Heirman, 2011);
- to learn if revenge plays a role in cyberbullying (König et al., 2010);
- to gather data on the psychological impact and coping strategies (Schenk & Fremouw, 2011); and
- to examine a case study of a 15-year-old girl who was severely affected by cyberbullying (Sivashanker, 2013).

While these studies have diverse purposes, all of them link a relationship of cyberbullying to online identities. In the case study of the 15-year-old girl, Sivashanker (2013) discussed the effect of anonymous online identities and the need to reconstruct online identities. The advancements in technology are rapidly presenting societal changes and challenges, not only in the practical uses of online identities but also in the ethical and spiritual aspects of human nature (Sivashanker, 2013).

In the above examples, studies with a focus on cyberbullying had a link to the topic of online identities. The reverse of this is also true. Studies with a focus on online identities had a tie to the topic of cyberbullying. Taraszow et al. (2010) linked the disclosure of personal information in the creation of an online identity to being a victim of cyberbullying. They found that their participants posted personal data, including contact information. While some of that information may seem harmless, such as e-mail addresses and IM screen names, according to Taraszow et al., posting such data places

people at risk of becoming a victim. Another example showing a relationship between online identity and bullying is Usita's (2010) analysis of adolescents forming their online identity. In her discussion, Usita addressed three potential dangers, one of which is cyberbullying. Usita's purpose was to study online identity formation in the theoretical framework of Erikson (1968) and Marcia's (1966) identity formation theories. As with other studies regarding online identity, Usita linked the potential risk of cyberbullying in the discussion of online identity.

This section showed potential problems and concerns related to online identities, including adverse effects on personal relationships, future employment opportunities, and privacy, as well as becoming a victim or perpetrator of cyberbullying. A secondary purpose of this discussion demonstrates how researchers tie the topic of online identity to the dangers associated with it. The problems and concerns are an important aspect to consider when dealing with the concept of online identity. The next section outlines studies on online identities that closely relate to the topic of high school graduate students' perspectives of creating an online identity.

Literature on Online Identity

Compared to longer-standing topics in education, the topic of online identity has a limited amount of exposure and research published in peer-reviewed studies. This limitation is particularly true within the realm of the Internet environment since the enculturation of Web 2.0. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the entrance of Web 2.0 changed the face of technology for users in terms of providing increased capabilities. Web 2.0 transformed the mode of web pages from static to dynamic and allowed for user-

generated, collaborative content. This change formed the Internet into more of a community- and socially-based platform rather than merely a database of information. Literature related to this study on online identity, therefore, is most applicable if it contains studies performed since the introduction of this community- and socially-based platform. This criterion narrowed the relevant search results.

Several common subthemes emerged from the related literature. The most relevant topics create four categories: logistics, anonymity, avatars, and the social aspect. The subtheme of avatars covers the area of gaming and learning in virtual environments. The literature regarding the social subtheme is the most applicable to this study; however, the other three areas surround the social subtheme and provide relevant insight into the topic. All four subthemes intertwine and are a part of the whole. Figure 3 shows a summary of the structure and relationship of the four subthemes that emerged during this literature review. Figure 3 is not an all-inclusive representation of every theme regarding online identity. It outlines the research topics that have a relevant relationship to this study. The following sections contain a description of each category and the relevance to the topic.

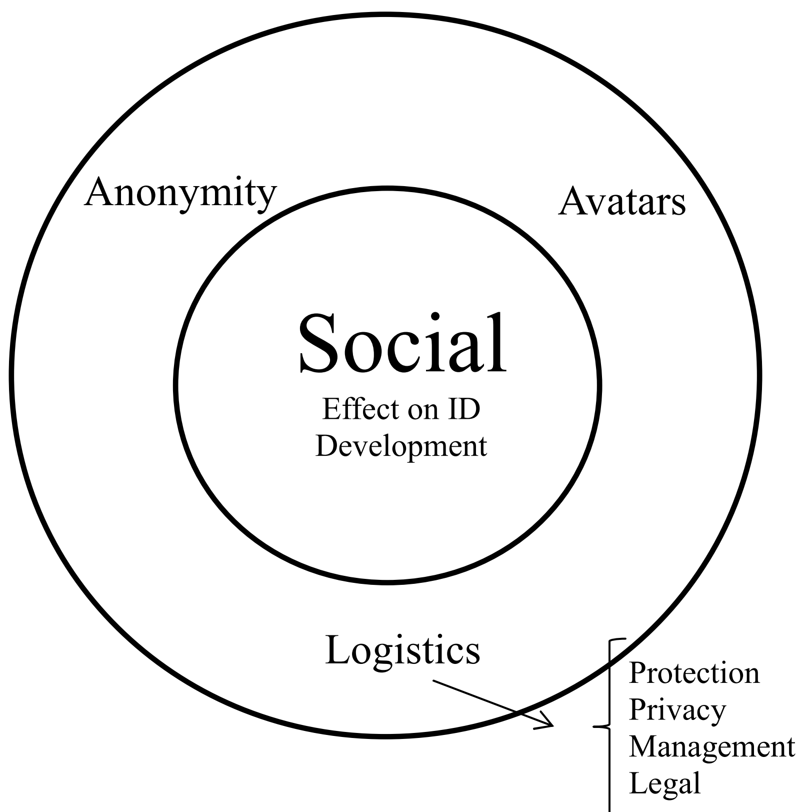


Figure 3. The relationship and structure of the four subthemes.

The logistics subtheme. For the use in this review, the label of *logistics* groups the literature regarding protection, privacy, management, and legal considerations with online identity. While these topics may not directly relate to high school graduates' perceptions of online identities, these logistical areas are important aspects of having an online identity (Geeta, 2011; Hames, 2009; Hartzog & Stutzman, 2013; Saxby, 2014). They are a necessary part of the frame that surrounds this study on online identity (Figure 3). Because the logistics subtheme is only part of the frame, this discussion is limited to the literature that closely relates to the topic of this study.

The issues of protection, privacy, management, and legal considerations intertwine in the literature because those topics intertwine in the realities of online identities. Saxby (2014) addressed the issue of electronic identity at the 2013 International Conference on Legal, Security, and Privacy Issues in IT Law (Saxby, 2014), The main concerns discussed were the need to develop processes for identity management, privacy concerns, challenges with identity in the digital age, and the need for protection through policy, laws, and regulation. Similarly, in an analysis of court cases and the law regarding online identity, Lund (2012) provided legal guidelines to consider when managing one's online identity. Those same keywords also linked together in Hartzog and Stutzman's (2013) analysis, which reinforced Lund's results. Hartzog and Stutzman’s suggested framework for managing online identity included elements of privacy, protection, and the law. Showing this recurring theme of logistics is the purpose of this discussion. The details of the laws, procedures of privacy protection, or methods of identity management are beyond the scope of this study. These logistical considerations are part of the structure that frames the topic of social online identities (Figure 3).

For example, the wider social platform enabled by Web 2.0 points to an oxymoronic situation. There is an increase in social interaction, but there is also an increase in anonymity among those who are socializing (Sirivianos, Kim, Gan, & Yang, 2014). Anonymity plays a role in privacy and protection, yet it also plays a role in dangers and level of trust (Sirivianos et al., 2014). These factors link to legal considerations, such as the penalties for privacy intrusion (Smedinghoff, 2012). In terms

of trust, it is difficult for a user to know the real identity of another online user. For example, an online reviewer might be a biased author or a person with no credibility on the subject being reviewed (Sirivianos et al., 2014). Not knowing a real identity also leads to dangers. There are many dangers as outlined by Geeta (2011) and mentioned in earlier in this chapter. Two examples of dangers that can directly affect high school graduates include phishing (Geeta, 2011) and copyright infringement (Hames, 2009).

Phishing is the act of stealing a person's passwords, account numbers, and other data with the intent to seize the person's online identity (Geeta, 2011). In a quantitative survey of 151 undergraduate students, Arachchilage and Love (2013) found that students perceived believed they had a low level of susceptibility or threat of phishing attacks. Statistics, as reported by Arachchilage and Love and Geeta, indicated that the number of reported phishing attacks were increasing, thus the result of Arachchilage and Love's study was to educate students on the realities of susceptibility, threat, and severity of phishing. Having an online identity means being susceptible to online identity theft (Arachchilage & Love, 2013).

The other example mentioned above that affects high school graduates is copyright infringement. When discussing copyright infringement, educators think in terms of helping students avoid illegally copying music or written text. For example, Elander, Pittam, Lusher, Fox, and Payne (2010) evaluated an intervention program designed to help undergraduate students avoid unintentional plagiarism. Owens and White (2013) also implemented several strategies over a 5-year period to examine which combination of strategies would be most effective in reducing the occurrence of

plagiarism by undergraduate students. In the music genre, students and teenagers are particularly susceptible to illegal music sharing, despite the severity of the law (Moseley, 2010). In the light of online identities, however, both the victim and perpetrator sides of copyright infringement are relevant. Educators are teaching authorial identity to help students understand what it is and means to be an author. The goal is to help students relate to a real person who owns the work (Elander et al., 2010; Holt, 2012). Tying all of this into privacy, protection, and online identity management, Hames (2009) stated that authors must protect their online identities. Now with the avenue of online submissions for writings and manuscripts, it is easier for others to author ownership.

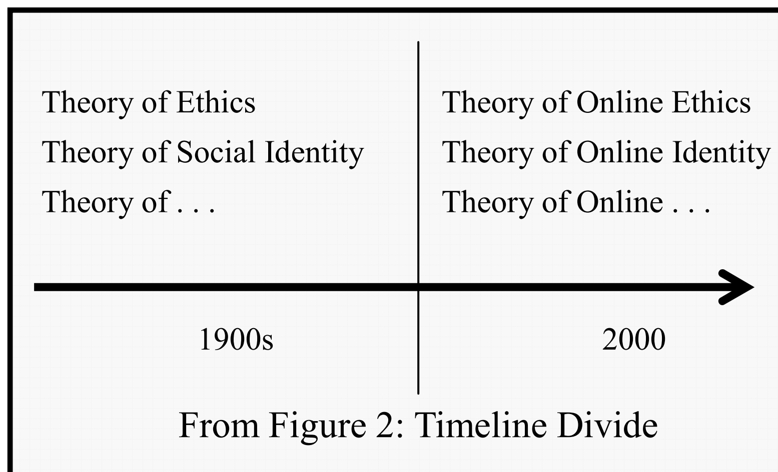
Phishing and copyright infringement are only two examples that show a relationship between online identities and the logistics of privacy, protection, management, and the law. Legal aspects are an important consideration when managing an online identity (Lund, 2012), particularly in light of the Web 2.0 platforms (Burrell, 2010). More specifically, McDermott (2012) outlined legal issues concerning minors and social networking sites. Later sections of this chapter outline the link between online identities and social networking sites. The law currently does not provide enough protection for children, who are the most vulnerable, in terms of privacy and personal online information (McDermott, 2012). The issues and research on these topics are relevant in light of Schmidt and Cohen's (2013) prediction of the virtual population outnumbering earth's population. These topics are a part of every person's online identity.

The anonymity subtheme. An anonymous identity is only one type of online identity, yet studies on online identity have focused on anonymity, particularly in the

field of computer communications (Gradinaru, 2013). Different studies and peer-reviewed journal articles show the positive effects and the possible negative consequences of having online, anonymous identities, particularly in light of the social nature brought on by the Web 2.0 era. Some study results conflict with other findings, while other studies contain an internal conflict. This section presents a review of the literature, showing the dichotomous character of online anonymity as presented by these various studies. Online anonymity may be a well-discussed area due to the contradictory nature of the topic.

Spencer-Scarr (2010) named one of the conflicts *Internet anonymity paradox*, which means that the increased ability of anonymity creates both advantages and disadvantages in the same situation. For example, while collaborators may be more open to express greater or deeper thoughts behind a sense of security felt with a shield of anonymity, others may be reluctant to believe or trust words written by an unknown person (Spencer-Scarr, 2010). Spencer-Scarr focused on the power of online collaboration, where the Internet anonymity paradox creates a paradoxical line at the issue of trust. The underlying issue, according to Spencer-Scarr, is that individuals should not try to apply an understanding of trust in the cyber world as they do in the real world. Anonymity creates and strips away because people try to judge and understand the concept of trust online as they do in the face-to-face world, and those two worlds are not the same (Spencer-Scarr, 2010). This differing viewpoint about trust brings another possible element to modify Figure 2. The content in Figure 2 questioned if classical theories apply to the technology environment of the new millennium. A modified version

might show the divide being the face-to-face world versus the online world, instead of the divide being that of a timeline (Figure 4). Considering the topic of trust under the light of two different environments would support Spencer-Scarr's belief that anonymity in the online world is not the same as anonymity in the face-to-face world. Sirivianos et al. (2014) supported this notion that privacy protection allows users to express opinions more freely, but, at the same time, it causes an issue with trust. Their solution was a proposed system called FaceTrust to help users assess the veracity of user assertions. The above two examples were studies on collaboration and a verification system, but the basis of the studies was the challenge presented by the dichotomous nature of anonymous online identities.



versus

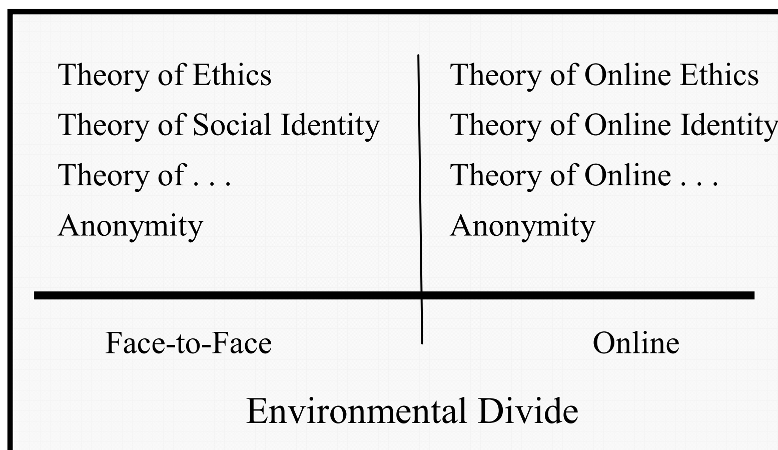


Figure 4. Consider theories in an environmental divide versus a timeline divide.

Gradinaru (2013) and Rose (2012) extensively discussed another struggle with the issue of online anonymity, that of freedom of speech versus danger. Gradinaru questioned if anonymity is essential to accommodate the need for freedom of speech. Anonymity may allow for a greater sense of freedom of speech, but anonymity may not be essential, particularly in the light of the potential dangers (Gradinaru, 2013).

One such danger is defamation (Vamialis, 2012). The laws on freedom of speech versus the right to protect one's reputation are intricate (Vamialis, 2012; Rose, 2012). Vamialis's (2012) goal was to help educate users on the various stipulations, such as publisher identity, the role of passivity, intent, the level of truth, amount of editorial control, and jurisdiction. Because Web 2.0 has created a highly user-generated environment, the multitude of avenues to post social messages about one's character is unprecedented (Spencer-Scarr, 2010). Most users will not be aware of these intricacies as they anonymously post potentially defamatory statements online (Vamialis, 2012). Vamialis, in slight contradiction with Spencer-Scarr (2010), believed that users should be applying the morals and levels of respect of the face-to-face world to online activities. Anonymity weakens morality and respect, causing defamation issues (Vamialis, 2012).

Rosenberry (2011) and Santana (2011) conducted studies due to similar defamation concerns. While these studies were about online newspaper commentary forums and not necessarily education, this genre is a model for online anonymity due to the magnitude and engrossment of the topic of anonymity and Web 2.0. Web 2.0 greatly affected the large newspaper industry, and online reader comment forums were critical to the continuation of the industry (Santana, 2011). The pros and cons of anonymity plague

the industry (Santana, 2011). Similar to Vamialis (2012), Rosenberry outlined several lawsuits and problems caused by online anonymity, particularly on online commentaries to newspaper postings. Rosenberry surveyed 528 readers of online newspapers who post commentaries. The purpose of the study was to learn about reader's perspectives about online anonymity. The results of the study demonstrated another discord regarding online anonymity. Almost 70% of the participants agreed that online commentary conversations were overly negative, and 83.2% of the participants agreed that the negativity makes the conversations less productive. Additionally, 72.3% of the respondents agreed that anonymity promotes anger and insults. Despite these high percentages of agreement on the negative, less productive and insulting tendencies of anonymity, only 26.9% of the respondents thought that identity should be required, thus removing anonymity. Although users state that anonymity generates negativity and hurts productive conversations, they still promote the use of anonymity. Santana's quantitative study to 435 participants had similar results, in that only 13.8% of the responders agreed that online commentary forums contained productive conversations.

An interesting dual side to this anonymity discussion is anonymity regarding self versus others. The above researchers agree that anonymity promotes negativity when talking about other people or issues because readers will speak more freely if they hide their identity (Santana, 2011). Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013), however, found that bloggers who reveal their identity are more forthcoming and less inhibited with postings than those bloggers who are anonymous.

Other opposing views in research studies include autonomy versus affiliation (Morio & Buchholz, 2009), online versus offline disparities (Giang, 2010), and educational value (Burke, 2013a; Cornelius, Gordon, & Harris, 2011; Yu & Liu, 2009) versus cyberbullying risk (Sevcikova, Smahel, & Otavova, 2012; Srivastava, Gamble, & Boey, 2013; Sticca & Perren, 2013). All of these data point to the dynamic, unresolved nature of online anonymity, which may require more research but may never lead to an answer or resolution. When the Huffington Post online forum proposed a resolution to disallow anonymous postings, opposing views expressed equally strong opinions (Clapperton, 2013; Kates, 2013). A new way of looking at anonymity in the online world may be part of the answer (Spencer-Scarr, 2010).

The avatar subtheme. For this section of the literature review on online identity, the theme of avatars relates to gaming and virtual world environments, particularly in the realm of education. Studies on online identity and virtual worlds refer to a person's online identity in terms of his or her avatar representation. Studies on identity in virtual worlds carry a wide range of topics, including cultural and racial considerations (Dietrich, 2013; Lee & Park, 2011), disabilities (Carr, 2010), disorders (Garvey, 2010), multiple identities (Ribeiro, 2009), social group identities (Martey & Consalvo, 2011), and identity development (Burke, 2013b). A recurring theme is a debate over the pros and cons of the development of avatar identity and its use in education. The conversational debate on this issue is the primary topic of this section.

Duncan, Miller, and Jiang (2012) analyzed 100 published papers and studies in academic journals worldwide regarding the topic of incorporating the virtual world

environment as an educational tool. In relative standing to traditional educational methods, the virtual world environment is a relatively new area of study (Duncan et al., 2012). This element of newness may be the cause of the debate over the pros and cons of utilizing virtual worlds in education. It may not only be the newness of the technology, as others argue that physical world education is more realistic and valuable than the learning that occurs in a fabricated cyberspace environment (Wang, 2011). Along with a list of advantages and disadvantages of using virtual worlds in education, Duncan et al. included lists of current interest areas and topics for future research. In terms of identity, Duncan et al. found a need for more research to help inform the lack of understanding about the imbalance between a real world identity and a virtual world identity. Savin-Baden (2010), through a qualitative study of 10 students and 10 teachers, also found a recurring theme of confusion on how to represent one's identity. Part of the confusion is if people represent themselves as close to real life as possible and if that representation is as they see themselves through their perspective or the perspective of others. For example, Thomas and Johansen (2012) found that young females create avatars that represent their ideal image of themselves, and there was a statistically significant difference between their real selves and projected selves. On the other side, Lusher’s (2012) study resulted in students creating avatars based on how others would view them. This difference between the perspective of oneself and the perspective of others may be due to the environment or purpose of the avatar. Another point of confusion was the nature of a static versus dynamic state. Savin-Baden found discord in whether people stay the same or change over time and the opinion of performing such changes. This shift and change can happen

much more quickly and much more often in the cyber world than it occurs in the physical world. Savin-Baden concluded that the uncertainties of online identities raise many unanswered, problematic questions.

Some researchers, however, do not carry a conclusion of confusion but rather they conclude with positive outcomes. Hannaford (2012) observed and interviewed young children and found that imaginative play in virtual worlds helps towards identity practice, hence development. Beals (2010) concluded that virtual environments help with adolescent identity development. Beals believed that the virtual world is another environment for learning just like school, home, or the playground. This stance is in opposition of Wang's (2011) belief, stated above, that physical world education is more realistic and valuable than that of the virtual world. Beals concluded that the two worlds are interconnected, both playing an important role in youth identity development. Burke (2013b) supported this conclusion after conducting a 3-year qualitative study. The participants in the study experienced an emergence between the virtual and physical worlds toward their identity development (Burke, 2013b). For example, Burke found the virtual world provides an opportunity for early rehearsals and virtual character reenactments that cross over into the real world.

The variable of closeness to real life may have an influence on these research results. Suh, Kim, and Suh (2011) found that users with avatars that closely resembled themselves tended to have a more positive attitude toward the avatar and more realistic, functional use of the avatar. Likewise, Behm-Morawitz (2013) found that one's online virtual self had an influence on one's offline health and appearance. The online and

offline selves should not be separate entities, and the relationship between the two selves could provide other impactful influences on behavioral and intellectual development (Behm-Morawitz, 2013). Although these two studies were not specifically for educational purposes, they are recent studies showing a link between identity in the offline and online worlds. Perhaps these recent studies help ease the caution from forerunners such as Boon and Sinclair (2009) who, 4 years earlier, found difficulties, superficiality, and questionable effects on identity.

The social subtheme. The literature regarding the social theme contains the most closely related studies to this study on high school graduates' perception of online identity. Even so, many of the studies on online identity in this environment relate to the after effects of the online environment on identity. The lack of literature is on the perception of the creation of online identity, which this study calls the before step. This section contains a discussion of the related studies to online identity in terms of identity development. A few conflicts exist among different studies. A discussion of these conflicts adds an element of depth to this section.

The literature on online identity in the social arena of the online world contains studies regarding the effect on identity development. For example, Gonzales and Hancock (2008) interviewed 76 college students and found a difference in online versus offline public self-presentation and identity construction. There was a shift in identity construction in the online platform. Later, Walther et al. (2011) took Gonzalez and Hancock’s study a step further and found a specific cause for the identity shift. In a study of 212 university students, Walther et al., whose work focused on CMC, found that the

participants experienced an online identity shift based on feedback from others. The condition of the setting, whether it was a public blog or private page, did not play a role. The shift in identity occurred with specific personality traits that a user tried to portray.

To look at online identity construction through a focused lens, Alvermann et al. (2012) conducted a 2-year case study with five high school students. The intention of the research was to learn what and how students use the web to construct their online identities. They found that three of the five case-study students created multiple identities depending on the platform. All five students used several methods to develop their online identities, such as gaming, social networking, shopping, and remixing music. The study also resulted in a connection between online identity creation and gaining digital literacy at school. This finding conflicts somewhat with Greenhow and Robelia's (2009) findings that there was no connection between online identity creation activities and digital learning in the classroom. The conflict could be due to one of three possible variables. First, it could be a matter of development over time because there is a 3-year gap between the two studies. Second, the latter study only examined the social networking platform, whereas the former study examined multiple platforms. Third, the conflicting results may be due to a difference in the population and accessibility because Greenhow and Robelia's population was high school students from low-income families.

Other studies on the effect of online activity on identity development also reveal some differences. In a study of 1,158 Dutch students, ages 10 to 17, Valkenburg and Peter (2008) concluded that online identity experiments have a link to increased social competence but not to self-concept unity. Three years later, the same researchers

published a paper that pointed out conflicts in those results with other studies (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). The researchers demonstrated a need for further research to gain a clearer understanding of the effect of online identity exploration on the stability and internally consistent concept of offline identity. Right around the same time, Tobola (2011) also discovered a small, but consistent and significant relationship that called for further research. Tobola found that real world communications had a greater predictive positive relationship with identity development than virtual world activities. Another 2 years later, Davis (2013) saw the opposite effect of Valkenburg and Peter's and Tobola's studies mentioned above. The conclusion in Davis's study was that online activity and online communication played a positive role in secondary school students' sense of identity and self-concept clarity.

On the surface, the results may appear to be conflicting; however, the various results may be due to the concept of *change over time*. DeZwart and Lindsay (2012) discussed this concept of change over time, stating that many variables can contribute toward an evolution of an online identity such as time, context, purpose, and various roles. A few years earlier, Young (2009) conducted a study about specific tools and uses of social networking sites by 752 users between the ages of 15 and 65. The results of the study brought Young to the conclusion that there are not enough data on the relationship between online and offline selves. Giang (2010), however, found that there was quite a disparity between online and offline self-presentations, while Verni's (2012) results showed little disparity except in cases of embellishing positive attributes. Mesch and

Beker (2010) also found a lack of relationship between norms of offline identity disclosure and norms of online identity disclosure.

Another possible explanation of variances, as mentioned earlier, is the platform. For example, Raccanello's (2011) results aligned with Verni's (2012) findings. The results showed that online identity portrayal aligned with offline identity, except in some instances when a person wishes to embellish a feature. The discrepancy from Giang's (2010) results might be due to Raccanello's focus on social networking texts, as oppose to Giang's focus on anonymity. With similar results to Giang's study, Huang and Yang (2013) found that 72% of 608 high school students purposely engaged in online misrepresentation. The environment for this study was a dating platform.

The variables of platform and time are important in the online world, as the Internet is constantly evolving with significant changes, which affects its use and users (Joiner et al., 2012). Joiner et al. (2012) conducted a 10-year follow-up study on Internet use for that reason. The researchers specifically looked at the introduction of social networking sites, microblogging, and mobile technology. Joiner et al. hypothesized that innovations in technology caused changes on gender use and usage differences since the time of their 2002 study (Joiner et al., 2005). While the content of their study is not directly in alignment with the topic of online identity, their study supports the importance of the concept of change over time.

One other element that carries relevance to the social theme is the concern for one's online image. In a community-based, online support forum, students were concerned about their images and online identities, even when simply conversing about

academics on a forum (Baxter & Haycock, 2014). Other students were purposely careful on how they handled any negative remarks online, being sensitive to using covert, rather than overt actions to protect their online image (Strano & Wattai Queen, 2012). For example, instead of overtly requesting someone to delete a message or photo that looks damaging to a user's image, that user would simply untag it. This less obtrusive method would also help maintain the user's image (Strano & Wattai Queen, 2012). Another factor is the concern stated in many studies about how one represents him or herself online and that tie to potential employment (Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011; Greene, 2012; Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014; Kirkwood, Gutgold, & Manley, 2011; Paradise & Sullivan, 2012; Whittaker & Gillespie, 2013). According to Finn, Garner, and Sawdon (2010), regarding social networking sites, students struggle with the idea that potential employers can view these web pages at any time. The students saw this as an invasion of their privacy.

Summary and Transition

Researchers have only started exploring this relatively new, Web 2.0 field of study of online identity. The purpose of this study was to add data to help build the field. To accomplish this task, a conceptual framework as seen in Figure 1 provided the structure. At the foundation of the framework, two theories balance the topic by using a classic social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and a CMC theory (Walther, 2011). The next level of the framework shows the supporting concepts through the problems and concerns and the related literature. The literature on online identity evolved around four general themes and four specific subthemes. None of the thematic areas can stand alone

because they all intertwine. Figure 3 illustrates how logistics, anonymity, and avatars all surround the social element. The logistics of protection, privacy, management, and legal considerations are a part of having a social online identity. Avatars are a form of online identity, and anonymity is a key difference in online identity versus face-to-face identity.

Much of the literature on the social subtheme covered the after effect of online activity on online identity. The lack of literature is in the before stages. The purpose of this study was to learn about students' perceptions regarding online identity creation. This study is almost late, in that it might have been more beneficial to know these data 5 years ago before all the identity development began to occur when Web 2.0 launched. Joiner et al. (2012) commented on the necessity to monitor changes in the online world constantly due to quick evolutionary changes over short periods. In that light, this study's results might serve as a baseline in 2015, to use as a comparison point with results found in another 5 years. Student perception could change over the next 5 years. If so, educators will need to incorporate that perception into their teachings.

The conflicts seen in the results of various studies may be a result of change over time, different populations, or the various online platforms. One recurring theme in almost every study is the need to fill these gaps in the research in terms of those three variables, especially since the innovations introduced with the launch of Web 2.0. Another possible explanation of conflicts, particularly in the online versus offline world, may be the need to consider the face-to-face environment in a different context than the online world (Figure 4).

The intention of this study is to help add data toward answering those questions. The need to learn more about perceptions of online identity followed the model of several past studies. Those studies, like this study, aimed to understand the user's perspective toward actions resulting from online technology usage (e.g., Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Raccanello, 2011; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Chapter 3 outlines how the model of those studies aligned with the methodology for this IPA study on high school graduates' perspectives regarding online identity creation.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative, IPA study was to gain an understanding of the perspectives of working high school graduates regarding the creation of online identities. The intent was to add the exploratory findings to the literature base such that educators may have additional data to use in preparing how they teach educational technologies that use online identities.

This chapter covers the logistics of the study's research method, starting with a rationale of the selected research design and the role of the researcher. The middle section of this chapter breaks down the details of the methodology. The details include participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. The final sections cover the issues of trustworthiness along with the provisions made for ethical concerns and procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

A research design should stem from the research problem and question (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The research design for this study, then, emerged from the primary research question for this study: What are high school graduates' perceptions or viewpoints about creating online identities? The supporting subquestions included the following:

1. What are their perceptions of the definition and concept of an online identity?
2. What types of online identities do they identify that they create and for what purposes?

3. What types of thought processes do they encounter as they create these identities?
4. How have their purposes lined up with their intended results?
5. What stories do they have to share about their experiences or the experiences of others with the creation of online identities?

Based on the primary research question, the research methodology was a qualitative phenomenological design, specifically Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA approach. The three primary factors that contributed to the choice to use this method were the applicable nature of a phenomenology and an IPA approach, other related studies that used this approach, and the lesser applicability of other approaches.

Applicable Nature of Phenomenology and IPA

Phenomenology began as a philosophy that practitioners such as Van Manen and Moustakas helped form into a qualitative research methodology (Dowling, 2007; Kakkori, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Contributors to phenomenology as a philosophy include Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Arendt, Sarte, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida (Dall'Alba, 2009; Kakkori, 2009; Moran, 2000; Van Manen, 1990, 2007). From a philosophical standpoint, a divide exists in the perspective of descriptive versus interpretive phenomenology (Dowling, 2007; Kakkori, 2009; Van Manen, 1990). Van Manen (1990) explained the term *descriptive* as referring to the pure, uninhibited experience that someone has. He described the term *interpretive* as the interpretation of the experience knowing someone else's eyes are looking upon the event. Regardless of the difference, Kakkori (2009) stated that the pureness of the philosophy and the debate

between descriptive versus interpretive help to feed knowledge toward the research methodology. The debate should not distract from the value of the phenomenology philosophy (Kakkori, 2009). Instead, for researchers, the key for using a phenomenological approach is that it allows for the study of the lived experience of a phenomenon, without prejudgment or presuppositions (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). A phenomenological approach also helps to describe the essence of an experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The approach of a phenomenological study aligns with the primary research question of this study. More specifically, the three theoretical themes of Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA approach fit with this study's aim to learn about high school graduates' perceptions or interpretations on creating online identities. The three foundational pieces of IPA are phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). The phenomenology piece pertains to learning about the experience. The hermeneutics concept is the understanding of the experience from the interpretation of the high school graduates. Smith et al. warned that an IPA study is a double hermeneutic in that it is the researcher's interpretation of the participant's interpretation. The third concept, idiography, is studying a particular phenomenon for a particular people in a particular context (Smith et al., 2009). In this case, the particulars were identity creation by working high school graduates in the online space.

A phenomenological approach, according to Van Manen (1990), allows the opportunity to gain possible insights that help people understand and connect human behavior with the world. The exploratory qualitative findings from the study add data

toward a foundation for understanding the lived experience of online identities, which may help educators support, teach, or deal with this phenomenon in the classroom.

Related Studies Using Phenomenology

There have been related research studies involving online identity that implemented a phenomenological approach (e.g., Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Raccanello, 2011; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). The rationale and results behind the choice of a phenomenological method in those studies match the purpose of this study. The related studies aimed to understand the user's perspective when engaging in online technology with a particular relevance to online identity. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) stated the importance of using one-on-one interviews to gather personal opinions and anecdotes to understand the intricacy and complexity of online identity. Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008) strived to understand the online users' perspectives through learning about their experiences and opinions with cyberbullying. Although the specific topic was cyberbullying, the application is parallel with learning about online identities. Both studies were about lived experiences and perspectives, the exploratory nature of the experience, the online environment, and the need for understanding a phenomenon. A third example is Raccanello's (2011) study, designed to gather data on how social networking sites affect identity, interpretation of others' identity, and imagination. Raccanello, like Bullingham and Vasconcelos and Vandebosch and Van Cleemput, recommended that the phenomenon of online identity needs further exploratory research, particularly in light of the influence of online activity on the millennial student.

Many IPA studies relate to research on identity (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), the idiographic, phenomenological nature of IPA almost naturally ties in the concept of self or identity into any topic. For example, in the past 5 years, researchers used the IPA approach in studying identity and professionalism (Fragkiadaki, Triliva, Balamoutsou, & Prokopiou, 2013; Oakland, MacDonald, & Flowers, 2013), identity and students with learning disabilities (Davidson, Smith, & Burns, 2014), identity and eating disorders (Ison & Kent, 2010), and identity and student volunteering (MacNeela & Gannon, 2014). Although the studies on online identities mentioned in the previous paragraph did not specify an IPA approach, other researchers and educators deemed the use of phenomenology in researching online activities as appropriate and needed (e.g., Dall'Alba, 2009; Whitesel, 2009, Ping Yang, 2009). The newness of Web 2.0 introduced a new culture of online teaching and learning that requires an understanding of lived, online experiences as they exist in the social, cultural, and educational realm (Dall'Alba, 2009; Whitesel, 2009, Ping Yang, 2009). This need aligns with the phenomenology, hermeneutic, and idiographic foundations of IPA.

Less Applicable, Other Approaches

While other research methodologies may carry some pertinence toward answering the primary research question of this study, their application is less relevant than that of a phenomenological approach. From the standpoint of the larger picture, a quantitative method would not satisfy the research question. A key goal of quantitative studies is generalizability through a representative sampling of a population (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Qualitative studies, on the other hand, do not have a goal of

generalizability. Instead, Patton (2015) stated that the goal of qualitative studies is usually to gather information-rich data to obtain a deeper understanding, which is the goal of this study. A quantitative approach helps to test theories, variables, and relationships while a qualitative approach helps to explore and understand a social or human process (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). The nature of the primary research question is to understand the process of online identity creation and not to test theories or variables. At this stage, the millennial student's online identity is in need of exploratory research (Raccanello, 2011). The results might later be applicable toward testing relationships or finding generalizability.

In the realm of qualitative research methods, phenomenology had relevance toward answering the primary research question of this study. A phenomenology method was more relevant than a narrative, ethnographic, grounded theory, or case study approach. While narrative studies can capture a lived experience and a phenomenon, the goal of a narrative approach is to capture a chronological plotline of events and happenings (Creswell, 2013). An ethnographical approach studies the behaviors of a cultural group (Creswell, 2013), often through direct observation of activities (Moustakas, 1994). The online environment may be a type of culture, but the literature has not yet shown a general acceptance or definition of the Internet as a defined culture (Nuncio, 2012; Guobin Yang, 2009). Also, observations of behaviors do not provide the interpretive perspective of the participant. In considering a grounded theory approach, the answer to the primary research question could generate a grounded theory regarding online identity creation. A grounded theory, however, may be premature. Knight-Lynn

(Laureate, Inc., 2008) suggested that the results of a phenomenological study could provide data toward building a new theory about the phenomenon. At this stage, learning about the phenomenon was the goal, and building a grounded theory might be more appropriate for a future study. Finally, a case study methodology was another potential approach. Creswell (2014) described a case study as studying one or multiple cases over a period, using multiple sources for data collection, and examining data on a detailed level. A case study would be valuable to obtain an in-depth understanding of the users' perspectives. It might have provided an opportunity to check their interview results with the participants' online social networking pages, avatars, blogs, or other online identities for consistencies or inconsistencies. Observing interactions over time would strengthen the results and add rigor to the data. A case study was not the first choice because analyzing the after results of creating online avatars, blogs, and pages was not the goal of this study. The goal was to begin to understand the phenomenon of online identity creation.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, my primary role during the study's participant interaction and data-collection process was that of the interviewer. Before entering into the interview process, I considered three primary factors to help ensure an ethical and appropriate interview environment as well as validity of the data collected (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013).

First, I developed a relationship of integrity and trust with each participant to help ensure the best possible environment and quality of interview responses (Maxwell, 2013).

I used Patton's (2015) suggested approach of *empathetic neutrality*, which utilizes a researcher's care and concern for the participant while maintaining a neutral approach to the content or phenomenon. This approach allowed for empathy on a human level with as much objectivity as possible on the content level (Patton, 2015). Maxwell (2013) warned that the interviewer and interviewee have different perspectives going into the situation. With this in mind, a researcher should anticipate problems, communicate clearly, alleviate any fear of consequences, and take into consideration how people feel as they discuss their life with a stranger (Maxwell, 2013). To address those concerns, I provided a letter of invitation and consent form (Appendix A) to each participant. The letter communicated clear logistics, provided the purpose and process, and provided other information to help place the participant at ease. At the start of the interview, I reviewed the letter of invitation and consent form with each participant to reinforce a safe and comfortable environment. Before the start of the interview, I provided an opportunity for each participant to ask questions or express concerns.

Second, I identified any relationships or potential conflict of interest that may have existed with the participants (Maxwell, 2013). The population for the study was high school graduates, ages 18 to 21, who were working in the northeast region of the United States. The choice of this region was partially a choice of convenience, in that I had an established relationship with retail business owners in that region. It was also more feasible, within time constraints, to conduct interviews in one focused area rather than many geographically separated areas. The established relationships I had with the owners did not affect the study or the participants because participation was voluntary

and confidential. While the participants were not anonymous to me, due to the face-to-face interview method, the business owners did not know who did or did not volunteer for the study. The participants knew that their involvement did not have any connection or bearing on their employment or employment status as the owners would not know who participated in the study.

The third consideration for an ethical and appropriate interview environment is the acknowledgment of any potential researcher bias. In the past, phenomenologists used a technique called *epoche*, or bracketing (Creswell, 2013), to set aside any presuppositions or biases as not to influence the process (Overgaard, 2003). More recently, Maxwell (2013) stated that a researcher cannot eliminate bias, but rather acknowledging bias can help both the reader and the researcher. When a researcher acknowledges bias through bracketing, it is useful for the reader to process the study with a lens that frames the researcher's frame of mind (Maxwell, 2013). A reader can understand the process, the results, and the interpretation through the perspective of the researcher, thereby placing the reader's value on the information with a view of the researcher's perception. A researcher can benefit from bracketing by taking care to shape the research, results, and interpretation with minimal negative consequences, influences, or impairments due to bias (Maxwell, 2013).

For this study, my primary bias is the perception that young students are in need of guidance on ethical and safe behavior in the online world. This guidance is necessary for both the school environment and for the years ahead as students grow into adults. In terms of online identity, I believe the field is in an infancy and developmental stage and

that there may be a lack of consensus or understanding about the concept. The concept of online identity came into being long after I graduated from school, so I have no previous experience or perspective about online identity as a student or young adult.

Methodology

This section outlines the details of the execution of the study in such a manner that replication is possible. The following sections include the logic behind the participation selection process, the development of the instruments, the data collection strategy, and the data analysis execution.

Participation Selection Logic

The sampling goal for this phenomenology study was to interview 7-10 recent high school graduates, ages 18 to 21, who were working in the retail industry. I interviewed nine participants. Several factors contributed to the determination of this strategy and sample size.

Sample strategy and size. The choice of strategy and size for a phenomenology study depends on the research question and the purpose of the study (Mason, 2010; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Sample size is a factor of several considerations, such as the goal, the purpose, the value, and the realistic limitations of time and resources (Patton, 2015). With those factors in mind, this study employed a purposeful sampling strategy.

Purposeful sampling involves selecting a smaller sample size to allow an in-depth study of information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). Contrary to a large, random population needed in quantitative studies, qualitative studies require a purposeful, often smaller,

sample (Patton, 2015). A random sampling could even hurt a qualitative study by not providing the needed case types (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Because the purpose of the study was to understand the perspective of recent, high school graduates about online identity creation, the purposeful sampling strategy fit the purpose. The strategy matched the purpose by targeting a specific population and looking for in-depth knowledge to offer insights into a central issue (Maxwell, 2013).

Several factors contributed to the choice of the sample size for this study. Mason (2010), who analyzed 560 qualitative studies that employed an interview technique, cited several researchers recommending a range of sample sizes from five to 25 for phenomenological studies. This study's sample size followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) warning that a study cannot cover every variable of all populations, locations, and possible content. It was also important to consider the scope of the project, the duration, and the number of participants used in other similar studies (Morse, 2003). This study's sample size used Smith et al.'s (2009) sample size recommendation for an IPA study and the model of four recent, peer-reviewed phenomenological studies that used an interview technique.

Smith et al. (2009) recommended three to six participants for master level IPA studies and four to 10 for doctorate level IPA studies. The number of participants is not the important factor (Smith et al., 2009). The key is to gain detailed, first-person accounts that allow the participants to tell their stories while speaking freely and reflectively (Smith et al., 2009). The goal was to obtain enough data to find similarities and differences but not so much data that the task becomes unmanageable (Smith et al.,

2009). Along those lines, researchers who performed interview-style, phenomenological studies regarding online identity or social networking sites employed eight to 10 participants (Table 1).

Table 1

Sample Size in Four Phenomenology Studies Using Interview Technique

Author/Date	**Topic**	**Sample Size**
Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013	Online identity	10
Raccanello, 2011	Social networking/online identity	10
Powell, Gray, and Reese, 2013	Social networking	8
Smith, 2013	Social networking	10

The element of saturation was another factor in considering sample size. Previous similar studies helped in the prediction (Morse, 2003). The saturation point is a gray line, and reaching saturation may be impossible because new information, subsets, and categories can constantly emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The goal of saturation, according to Corbin and Strauss (2008), is to ensure the data are "sufficiently well developed for purposes of <the> research and accept what has not been covered as one of the limitations of the study" (p. 10).

Finally, Morse (2003) advised adding a few extra participants to allow for unanticipated issues that may lower the number of usable participant feedback. Pulling together the above factors along with a realistic timeframe for a dissertation study, my goal was to analyze data from a minimum of seven participants. I recruited 12

participants to accommodate for the dropout and unusable data factors. Three people dropped out. In the end, I interviewed nine participants. All of them provided usable data.

Participant identification and recruitment. The participants were employees of several businesses located in the northeast region of the United States. After the business owners agreed to and signed a letter of cooperation, I provided each owner with a letter of invitation and consent form. I asked them to distribute the form to their employees who were 18 to 21 years of age. I also provided prewritten text for the business owners to use in the body of the recruitment-request e-mail (Appendix C). The content of the text showed that the request to participate was coming from me. After the business owners had distributed my recruitment materials via the first e-mail, all other contact and correspondence occurred between each employee and me.

The business owners made the initial contact with the eligible employees to keep the employees' contact information confidential at this first stage. In this way, I would not have access to employee contact information for those employees who declined to participate. The letter of invitation and consent form stated that if an employee had any questions or had an interest in participating, he or she would contact me directly. This process helped to keep employee participation confidential from the retail owners. The process also helped ensure there was no consequence to employment for choosing or not choosing to participate. The letter of invitation and consent form also contained a deadline date to respond. I had planned for the owners to send a reminder e-mail 2 days before the deadline date. This e-mail was not necessary because I had enough volunteers before the deadline date.

When I received a letter of invitation and consent form from an interested employee, I sent an acknowledgment of receipt of consent form (Appendix D) to the participant. The acknowledgment of consent contained a thank you, acknowledgment of receipt, and a reiteration of the criteria for participation. Participants were able to indicate if their preferred choice of communication was by e-mail, phone call, or text. I communicated with each participant according to his or her marked choice. I set up an interview with each participant and sent a confirmation of interview communication (Appendix E) to confirm the interview. I had a wait-list process and communication (Appendix F) prepared in the event that I received more than 12 volunteers. Because I received exactly 12 volunteers, I did not need to use that process. In the event that I did not recruit enough volunteers, I had arranged with the business owners to open the recruitment process to other locations to find more volunteers. I did not need to use this contingency plan.

This participant selection process contained many steps, forms, and communication documents. To maintain organization and to see the flow of the process, I used a checklist that summarized the process in a sequenced list (Appendix G).

Instrumentation

The primary instrument for data collection was a list of semistructured interview questions. While other methods of data collection for an IPA study are useful, Smith et al. (2009) recommended semistructured interview questions as an effective method. This technique allows participants to give first-person stories, to elaborate, and to express their thoughts and feelings (Smith et al., 2009). I created the interview questions based on the

research question. A digital, audio recording device served as a data-recording tool for each interview. I did not write notes during the interviews to avoid distracting a participant with note-taking activity. Instead, I wrote notes regarding any observed body language and other nonverbal cues immediately after each interview. This section describes the basis for the development of the interview questions. The explanation also includes the considerations made toward content validity and toward ensuring that the data-collection instrument addressed the research question.

The creation of interview questions needs to follow the goals of a study, which stems from the research question (Maxwell, 2013; Van Manen, 1990). The research question identifies the concept, or human phenomenon, which the study strives to understand. The interview questions generate the data to help understand the concept (Maxwell, 2013). There were several considerations made when I was creating interview questions that matched the goal of the study. For example, Van Manen (1990) warned not to go everywhere or nowhere. Questions that are too broad or too narrow can derail the intention by generating unmanageable data, by missing important parts of the phenomenon, or by missing important content relationships (Maxwell, 2013). A semistructured platform allows participants to elaborate and tell their stories (Smith et al., 2009). Development of interview questions should also consider content validity challenges. To find a balance and address content validity, I incorporated the following techniques:

1. Used open-ended questions: Open-ended questions allow respondents to explain the phenomenon as they see it and live it (Maxwell, 2013; Smith et al.,

2009). Open-ended questions also allow respondents to put their meaning on the experience, which helps gather a rich and deep understanding of the concept (Van Manen, 1990).

2. Structured the questions: Care in structuring a question helps to prevent long-winded or leading questions and helps to avoid burying assumptions or presuppositions into the questions (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). This consideration addresses content validity, making sure that the respondents provide their pure experience and that the questions do not influence, interfere, or persuade their answers (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Carefully constructed questions also help address the reactivity challenge to validity. Reactivity is the influence a researcher's presence may have on the respondent and the content of the responses (Maxwell, 2013). If questions are not leading or presumptuous and do not place a respondent on the defense, it may minimize any negative reactivity influence of the researcher. On a side note, as the interviewer, I took steps toward developing a comfortable environment and rapport with the respondents (see Appendix H: Interview Process).
3. Organized the flow of the questions: Janesick (2011) suggested beginning with a bigger picture or a basic, descriptive question. This organizational technique adds to the structural flow of an interview but also helps with the challenge of content validity. One challenge of content validity is if the respondents present their actual views (Maxwell, 2013). Starting with a

simple, basic question may help develop a level of comfort and rapport with the interviewer that helps ensure their answers are their true perspective.

4. Matched the types of questions with the goal: Acknowledging the type of questions in the interview brings awareness to how the questions match the goal, the quality of the questions, and the content (Patton, 2015). The interview questions for this study included questions about experience, behavior, and opinions, as suggested by Patton (2015). Patton also recommended asking questions regarding the past, the present, and the future. Another element added was using follow-up questions. An interviewer should have follow-up questions prepared to ask for elaboration, clarification, examples, anecdotes, experiences, or to compare and contrast responses (Janesick, 2011; Maxwell, 2013). These types of follow-up questions can contribute to content validity, ensuring the interviewer fully understands the response and does not need to speculate or incorrectly interpret the answers during data analysis (Van Manen, 1990).

There were nine interview questions in this study (Appendix I). The nine questions supported the research questions (Table 2).

Table 2

Interview Questions Mapped to Research Questions

Interview Question	Collects Data for	Research Question
1		Main, 1
2		Main, 1
3		Main, 2, 3, 5
4		Main, 2, 3, 4
5		Main, 2, 4
6		Main, 3, 4, 5
7		Main, 1, 3, 5
8		Main, 1
9		Main, all

Data Collection Process

The data collection process was through interviews. I collected the data by interviewing each of the nine participants in a one-on-one setting. The interviews averaged 45 minutes in length. I had a plan in case there was a surplus or deficiency in the number of participants. I did not need to use the plan because I had reached the desired number of interviews. I used a digital recording device to record each interview. At the end of each day, I transcribed the voice recordings and my hand written notes.

Each interviewee needed to participate in only one interview. After the interview and the transcription process, I sent a summary of the transcription to each participant, asking for confirmation, clarification, or comments. Participants knew in advance to expect this follow-up communication. At the conclusion of each interview, I reminded the participant of the next steps, provided an opportunity for questions, and included a thank-you gesture. Appendix H contains the protocol for the entire interview process.

The location for the interview was a neutral business environment. Participants received all location logistics in the letter of invitation and consent form and the confirmation of interview communication.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the first step in trying to make meaning out of all the collected data into the essence of the studied phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Moustakas, 1994). The challenge is the interpretation process that attempts to categorize and place meaning on a lived experience (Patton, 2015; Van Manen, 1990). This interpretive process is not an exact science but a necessary process to attempt to capture or describe a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009; Van Manen, 1990). Maxwell (2013) recommended a process of small and natural steps to make the data analysis process manageable.

I followed the recommendations from Smith et al. (2009), Creswell (2013), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Patton (2015) for analyzing the data. Combining their suggestions, I employed the following data analysis process:

1. Reviewed the research questions. Patton (2015) suggested that a review of the research questions at the start of the data analysis process helps to remind a researcher of the purpose and the big picture.
2. Transcribed the data. Patton (2015) stated that the transcription process begins the transition from data collection to data analysis. I typed the audio recordings and my notes into Word documents at the end of each day. For example, one day consisted of two interviews. At the end of that day, I transcribed the audio recordings and my notes that night. It was helpful to

transcribe the data while the experience was fresh in my mind. I believe I had a better recollection of the intention of my notes and the nuances of the interviews than if I waited until later to transcribe the data.

3. Read the notes. Smith et al. (2009) recommended a step of reading and re-reading the notes. This step helps a researcher become actively engaged and immersed into a participant's point of view (Smith et al., 2009).
4. Created a contact summary sheet for each participant. After transcribing the audio recordings, I created a contact summary sheet as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The summary sheet provided a lens to view the main themes, issues, questions, and concerns raised by each participant without getting lost in the details. The contact sheets also served as a start for seeing emerging themes and patterns amongst all of the interview results (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
5. Wrote notations. Smith et al. (2009) suggested writing descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. This categorization of comments may also help with the emergence of themes (Smith et al., 2009). At this point in the process, I had connected with the data in the following four ways:
    a. Heard the participants during the interviews
    b. Transcribed the audio
    c. Read the transcriptions
    d. Wrote the summary sheets

During each of the four steps, similarities and differences began to appear. I wrote notes during all four steps regarding themes, patterns, and differences as they began to emerge.

6. Connected the data to the research questions. I used Table 2 as an outline to begin connecting the data to each research question. For example, I typed the first research question into a document. I identified the interview questions that supported Research Question 1 by using Table 2. I then copy and pasted each participant's response to those interview questions into the document. In this way, I had all of the participants' responses that supported Research Question 1 in one document. I repeated the process for the other research questions.
7. Began the coding process. There are pros and cons to predetermined codes versus emergent codes (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Because the purpose of this study was to understand perspectives, predetermined codes may have preset expectations. I chose to allow codes to emerge organically. Chapter 4 and Appendix J contain a detailed description of the coding process.
8. Identified emergent themes. The coding process resulted in an Excel spreadsheet (Appendix J) which created a visual that helped identify patterns and themes.
9. Identified deviant structures. It is equally important to recognize the similarities as well as the differences (Patton, 2015). The notes describe in Step 5 above include notations on differences.

This manual data analysis process was more effective for me than using qualitative data analysis software (QDAS). After examining several QDAS packages and reviewing the literature regarding QDAS packages (e.g., Hughes & Silver, 2011; Humble, 2012), I decided not to utilize a QDAS package. Hand coding the data manually gave me a more intimate relationship with the data, which was an important piece of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). The process of learning the QDAS package would have drawn attention away from the intent of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Opponents of the qualitative research approach find the qualitative method to be too subjective, questioning the quality and value of the research data and results (Patton, 2015). In any research method, it is not possible to guarantee credibility or quality (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Instead, the goal is to use techniques that will help provide the best possible interpretation of the findings while showing due diligence in providing quality results (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Researchers use a variety of terms, often times trying to equate quantitative techniques to qualitative techniques. Examples include objectivity versus subjectivity, validity versus credibility, and reliability versus dependability (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This section addresses the issues of trustworthiness by explaining how the research process helped to ensure confirmability, credibility, transferability, and dependability.

To help ensure confirmability, I established a stance of empathetic neutrality. Patton (2015) described having a position of empathetic neutrality as a way for the researcher to identify the fine line between being too involved and too distant. Over

involvement can lead to judgmental situations while a distant perspective can lead to a lack of understanding (Patton, 2015). The researcher must have a neutral relationship with the phenomenon, such that he or she is not trying to prove anything and, therefore, does not have a need to manipulate the data. During the interviews, I made a concerted effort to not react or respond to any stories. For example, when one participant described an attempted abduction, I remained interest but neutral. My normal reaction to such a story would be an emotional, sympathetic response. I also made a conscious effort not to use emotional words throughout the interviews and in writing the results.

To help ascertain credibility for the data and the results, I employed a negative case analysis and member checking. Negative case analysis entails specifically mentioning any rival cases or nonconforming situations found in the data. Chapter 4 contains a description of the negative case analysis and member checking and process. I also believe I may have attained a level of saturation in the participant pool. As described in the Sample Strategy and Size section of this dissertation, saturation is an estimate. Based on previous studies listed in Table 1, I estimated achievement of saturation with eight to 10 participants. After conducting the nine interviews, it appeared that I achieved a certain level of saturation. Chapter 4 includes the data that supports the possibility of reaching saturation.

Another issue of trustworthiness is transferability. With quantitative methodologies, this equates to generalizability, or the degree to which the results can generalize to a similar population. Qualitative studies do not have a goal of generalizability. Instead, the goal of qualitative studies is to obtain information-rich cases

for in-depth understanding (Patton, 2015) to explore and understand a social or human process (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). For the findings to add a valuable contribution to the research field, the findings need to be transferable to some degree. So that readers can measure the transferability of the findings, the researcher should provide clear and detailed information (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A description should include specifics regarding the participant demographics, the setting, the situation, and the process, along with details about the responses and findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A thick description, including accurate transcriptions and quotations of participant responses, allows the reader to decide on the degree of fit or similarity to other similar situations (Schwandt et al., 2007). As an example, Schwandt et al. (2007) described transferability as, "I might develop a story of the way he interacts with them and tell it to others who find themselves in the same situation" (p. 13). This descriptive approach allows the others to relate to the findings and apply some or all of the findings to their situation (Schwandt et al., 2007). This study contains explicit detail on the study logistics and thick descriptions of the participant responses to allow for potential transferability in similar situations.

Dependability or consistency is another issue of trustworthiness. The collection and interpretation of the data performed should be replicable (Krefting, 1991). One method of ensuring dependability of the interpretation of data is an audit trail. In this case, a documented trail of the coding process adds to the dependability of the findings. Ensuring dependability in the data collection process is not as simple as creating a documented trail (Krefting, 1991). Variability is an expected result of qualitative studies

(Krefting, 1991). Accounting for those possible variations helps toward developing dependability of the data. For example, listing possible variations such as participant fatigue or a change in a participant's life situation will help view the dependability factor in the light of variables (Krefting, 1991). I documented, in Chapter 4, potential variables that create a lens around the dependability factor.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical considerations include several areas, such as participant protection, research integrity, and researcher's intent. Each research participant needs protection of his or her rights, privacy, and welfare (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008) described a controversial case about college students' attitudes (p. 71). The controversy was that the students were uncertain of the anonymity and confidentiality of the survey. This uncertainty brought criticism regarding the actual intention and use of the survey. To avoid such a situation and to respect research ethics, I clearly documented the intent of the study and all of the logistical aspects of the study. I met all of the requirements set by Walden University's research ethical standards.

The Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study. The approval number was 04-01-15-0011076, with a validation date through March 31, 2016. I completed the interviews for the study in May 2015. The IRB process helped to ensure protection, privacy, and integrity by measuring any risks to participants and confirming that the benefits would outweigh the risks. The IRB process also checked for the integrity of the data collection tool, the nature of confidentiality, and the proper procedures for

informed consent. As described in the Participant Identification and Recruitment section of this chapter, participating businesses received the letter of invitation and consent form and the letter of cooperation that ensured a clear understanding and an agreement for them to allow their eligible employees to participate in the study. The eligible participants received the letter of invitation and consent form, which outlined the voluntary nature of the study, the no-consequence status of agreeing or not agreeing to participate, and the no-consequence status of changing their minds at any time. The letter of invitation and consent form explicitly explained the purpose and intent of the study. This explanation helped to avoid any misunderstanding as seen in the Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008) example listed above and to minimize the risk of tainting or skewing participants' answers.

An additional objective of the letter of invitation and consent form was to ensure participants of confidentiality. The content of the letter reiterated that no one would know the real identities of the participants except for those who must know their identities for the execution of the study. Those who may know their real identity included me, as the interviewer, and any university staff that is required to know per the IRB approval. This statement of confidentiality means that the business owners, the participant’s coworkers, or any reader of the study will not know the identities of those who participated in the study. In the results section of the study, I used pseudonyms when referring to the participants to maintain their anonymity.

In terms of the researcher, acknowledgment of my bias placed a lens around the perspective of this study and the results. As well, my relationship with the business

owners should not have affected the participants. The participants were aware that the business owners would not know who participated unless the participants chose to inform the owner. I gave a $30 Walmart or Target gift card to each participant who completed the study. The gift card was a token of appreciation for their time and for volunteering to participate. The letter of invitation and consent form described this $30 gift card.

Following Walden University's requirements, I implemented data protection strategies. I did not post the raw data, in this case, the interview recordings and transcriptions, on any online website or online storage device. This action helps to prevent any possible online data breach occurrence. I have saved electronic copies on a password-protected laptop and a jump drive, as Walden requires data to be in two locations. Per Walden University standards, the raw data will be available for retrieval for a minimum of 5 years. Only I will have access to the raw data during that time. After 5 years, I will destroy the electronic copies per industry standards for destruction of electronic materials.

Summary

This study used an IPA approach, based on the match of the approach to the primary research question and based on the lack of a match of other methodologies to the research question. As well, related studies on online identity served as a model for the use of this approach. The data collection protocol was a series of interview questions. Development of interview questions contained key considerations such as using open-ended questions, constructing the structure for best results, using a flow to help validity, and matching the interview questions to the research questions. I played the role of the

developer of the instrument and the interviewer. I conducted one-on-one interviews with nine volunteers who were recent high school graduates. The average time for each interview was 45 minutes. This purposeful sampling method and choice for the number of participants followed the advice of researchers (e.g., Mason, 2010; Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2015; Smith et al., 2009) and previous related studies (Table 1). Appendices G, H, and I outline the recruitment process, the interview process, and the interview questions.

The research study contained provisions to address the issues of trustworthiness, including confirmability, credibility, transferability, and dependability. These considerations helped to build quality and value to the findings of this study. Finally, ethical considerations were in place to ensure protection of the participants and the integrity of the study. The next chapter contains the findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the perspectives of working high school graduates regarding the creation of online identities. The primary research question was this: What are high school graduates' perceptions or viewpoints about creating online identities? There were five supporting subquestions. The results section of this chapter provides a review of each of the subquestions and provides the participants' responses to the subquestions. Eight themes emerged from the participants' responses, which are also in the results section.

The logistics of the study helped to frame the results section. These logistics include the setting, the demographics, the data collection, the data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness. The chapter begins with these logistics, continues with the results, and closes with a summary of the findings.

Setting

Each interview was a one-on-one interview that occurred in a quiet, private area. In the Data Collection section, I describe the geographical logistics of the three locations where the interviews occurred. The individual settings for the three locations included a hotel conference room and two private offices. The hotel conference room was approximately 800 square feet and was set up with two conference tables and four chairs. I only needed one table and two chairs, but the additional table provided the participants a place to put their belongings. Both private offices contained a desk and two chairs. Each office space was approximately 100 square feet in size.

During each interview, the participant sat on one side of the table or desk, and I sat on the other side. The digital recorder was in plain view in the middle of the table. I received permission from each participant to record the interview. I had a piece of paper with a list of the interview questions. I placed the paper on the table in plain sight for the participants to see that it was only a list of the questions so that their curiosity as to what I was holding would not distract them. As to not make the participants nervous, I opted not to take notes during the interview session. Instead, I made mental notes throughout the session. As soon as each participant left, I wrote down all of my comments.

I was not aware of any organizational or environmental changes in conditions that may have influenced the participants' responses. One possible influential logistical circumstance was that one person was 20 minutes late; however, there was plenty of time to complete the interview. I made sure this participant, whose pseudonym is Henry, had time to unwind and feel comfortable. All other participants arrived on time and had no visible signs of changes in situations that could influence their interview outcome. The next section reviews all of the participants' pseudonyms.

With each participant, I spent the first few minutes making sure they felt comfortable and relaxed. I was uncertain if the participants would feel uncomfortable talking about the topic of online identity; however, each participant talked freely and voluntarily shared many stories. There were no awkward silences. I did not detect any signs of discomfort.

Demographics

All participants were high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 21. At the time of the interviews, they all worked in the retail industry in the northeast region of the United States. Participation was voluntary. There were eight female participants and one male participant. No other demographic statistics are relevant to this study.

In Chapter 4 and 5, all participant names are pseudonyms. The chosen pseudonyms are completely random and have no similarity to their real names. The only similarity is that the one male participant has a male pseudonym. In Chapter 4, the results appear in alphabetical order according to the pseudonyms. This order has no resemblance to the order of the interviews or the order of an alphabetical list of their real names. The participants' pseudonyms are April, Emily, Heather, Henry, Jenny, Mary, Sandy, Sue, and Wanda.

Data Collection

There were nine participants. The study began with 12 participants. Two participants canceled, and one did not show up for the scheduled interview. Each person participated in a one-on-one interview with me. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. I recorded each interview using a digital recording device. I recorded each participant's acknowledgment of the existence of the recording device.

The nine participants were employees from four different store locations in the northeast region of the United States (Table 3). The first two stores were from the same chain of stores but in different locations. The store locations were between 5 and 90 miles apart. The original location for the interviews was a conference room in a local hotel.

Realizing this location was not convenient for the volunteers from all store locations, I modified the interview locations. For the employees of two of the stores, which were five minutes apart, I used the conference room as planned. For the other two stores, I arranged for a convenient, private office area in which to conduct the interviews.

Table 3

Participants from Each Store Location

Store 1	Store 2	Store 3	Store 4
April	Mary	Jenny	Henry
Emily	Sandy	Wanda	Heather
	Sue		

Evidence of Trustworthiness

This section provides a description of the efforts made to ensure trustworthiness. Four factors played a role in developing a level of trustworthiness. These factors were confirmability, credibility, transferability, and dependability.

To help ensure confirmability, I strived to establish a stance of empathetic neutrality (Patton, 2015). The first step toward this was a practice session. This session was not a pilot study but rather an informal rehearsal for me to test for any bias in my questions, to practice active and reflective listening (Smith et al., 2009), and to identify any potential judgmental reactions from me. I performed an informal practice interview session with a friend. I did find myself asking follow-up questions that were somewhat leading toward my personal bias. This practice session helped me to recognize this tendency before performing the actual interviews for the study. During the actual

interviews, I was careful not to ask any follow-up questions or make any comments that would be a judgmental reaction on my part.

In terms of credibility, I performed member checking. The first step in the member checking process was transcribing each interview. After transcribing an interview, I reviewed the data and wrote an extensive summary of the participant's interview. The transcription process and the creation of the summary document began an initial, informal analysis of the data. I e-mailed the summary to each participant, asking for feedback, changes, or if I misinterpreted any of their intended meanings. To help with credibility, I performed a negative case analysis by constantly checking for discrepant answers or outliers (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The first step in checking for discrepant answers occurred while writing the results of the responses to each research question. I read each participant's specific response that was applicable to a question. Then, I read the entire interview, looking for other related content as well as any discrepant content. After writing the summary for each research question and theme, I reviewed the participants' transcripts again. This time, I compared each transcript to the summary to see if any data were in opposition to the conclusion, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). No elements appeared to contradict the emergent themes in any persuasive manner. Maxwell (2013) mentioned that some data might differ from a conclusive summary, but that data may not be persuasively different. For example, in one research question, Henry's response was different from the other participants' answers. His answer was not persuasively different enough to be a discrepant case because his response aligned with the content of other

research questions. The Results section covers the details of this example. Another example is two participants who had unusually strong stances in comparison to the other participants. Despite the two participants' different attitudes, their answers still aligned with the answers from the other seven participants. The Results section of this chapter addresses those two cases.

Saturation is another consideration in providing evidence of credibility. It is difficult to know if saturation occurred; however, no new or unusual data appeared after the fifth interview. For example, eight of the nine participants gave the same response for why they created their online identity. The other participant's answer was different from the eight participants' responses. His reason, however, was not new data. His reason aligned with everyone else's answer to another question. Another example of potential saturation is the mention of the types of online identities, which included Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Vine, with Facebook and Instagram as the most highly used platforms. The last three participants mentioned the same platforms and did not add any new platforms. This lack of other platforms is not to say that there are no more types of online identities. It only indicates that these five platforms may be the most popular with this demographic. Saturation may not have occurred with the element of personal stories. Personal stories or experiences are not a variable that might reach saturation, as each story is personal and subject to personal interpretation.

So that readers can measure the transferability of the findings, the results section provides a thick description of the responses and findings, per Miles and Huberman's (1994) suggestion. At times, I summarized small sections, but in many instances, I used

the participants' exact words, as their own words capture the essence of their intentions. The use of their exact words, along with the details of the demographics, selection process, and setting, allows others to apply the findings to their situations (Schwandt et al., 2007).

For dependability, I have a document trail that includes the following:

- An e-folder and hard-copy folder of the signed letter of cooperation from the business owners whose employees volunteered for the study
- An e-folder and hard-copy folder of the signed letter of invitation and consent form from all of the participants
- The original interviews on a digital recorder
- Each interview transcribed and saved in a different Word document, plus one document containing all of the transcriptions of the interviews
- An Excel spreadsheet showing the codes in columns with participant names in rows
- A separate document that contained the data for each research question
- A document of common themes
- A document of all of my memos and notes that I made along the way

Another dependability factor is the understanding of any potential influences on a participant during the interview. I was not aware of any recent life changes or potential influences. An important consideration is a person's history and experiences with online identities. While no one shared any traumatic personal experiences, it is not possible to tell if a participant chose not to share such stories or if any of the stories about a friend

were really about the participant. Another factor to consider is the reason some people did not volunteer for the study while others did. It is difficult to tell if those who volunteered had certain traits or habits that are different from those who did not volunteer. Perhaps a person's personal experience with online identities encouraged them to volunteer or not.

Data Analysis

Two primary steps aided in the coding and thematic creation process. First, the process of transcribing the interviews provided the greatest avenue for identifying codes and themes. It took approximately 4 minutes to transcribe 1 minute of each interview. This involved process gave me an intimate familiarity of the data. As I typed each interview, every time I recognized a word, phrase, or theme from a previous interview, I noted these recurring responses in an Excel spreadsheet (Appendix J). The themes ran across the top column, and the participants' names were in each row. I wrote keywords in the intersecting cells for later identification. After transcribing all of the interviews, I wrote a summary of each interview for my purposes but also for the member checking process. This careful review and reminder of the content reinforced the coding and thematic process in the Excel spreadsheet. Later I used the *Find* feature in Word to retrieve the sections of each interview and placed the verbiage in a separate Word document for each theme. The content of this document produced the inductive creation of the themes.

The second process was the use of Table 2, which maps the interview questions to the research questions. To answer each research question, I started by using the mapping

in Table 2. For example, the mapping in Table 2 indicates that Interview Questions 3, 4, and 5 support Research Question 2. I located those interview questions in each participant's interview transcript. I copied and pasted those responses into a Word document. Because the interviews were semistructured, additional parts of the interview were relevant to a research question. After using Table 2, I reread the entire interview to find any other applicable remarks, in this example, for Research Question 2. This process deepened my connection with the data because after transcribing the notes and creating the summaries, I reread each entire interview five times for each of the five research questions. This immersion process helped to build and reinforce the themes and answers to the research questions.

The next section explains the answers to the research questions, the themes, and the two cases with discrepant attitudes. Quotations and examples from the interviews support the results.

Results

The purpose of the semistructured interview questions (Appendix I) was to support the five supporting research questions, which, in turn, supported the main research question. Table 2 shows the mapping of each interview question to a research question. All participants answered all the interview questions. Per Smith et al.'s (2009) recommendation, the interview structure allowed for further exploration and for the participants to talk freely, bringing up any topics that came to mind.

This section provides the responses to each of the five supporting research questions. Several themes emerged from those questions. Due to the open-ended nature

of the interview questions and the encouragement for further exploration, other topics and themes emerged. These other themes may not have a direct connection to the supporting research questions, but they do support the main research question: What are high school graduates' perceptions or viewpoints about creating online identities? The final part of this section will contain these other themes. A summary of the research questions and themes will close this chapter.

Two Participants with Unique Perspectives

The nine participants shared many commonalities. Seven of the participants seemed to have the same general attitude. This overall viewpoint was the expression of both the positive and negative sides of online identities in relative equality. The seven participants saw the benefits of their online identities as well as the potential hazards. The two other participants shared the overall perspective of online identities with the seven participants; however, these two participants expressed poignant attitudes that stood out over the attitudes of the seven participants. These two participants were April and Emily. Below is a snapshot of April and Emily. Understanding their viewpoints may help to frame the reading of the research results.

April. April is different from the others in that she does not condone the use of online identities. She no longer has any social media or any online identity accounts except for Snapchat with whom she only shares her snaps with eight people. April had Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at one time because her friends told her she should get them. April said, "My friends told me to get it to stay in contact with them, and they never contacted me." She found the platforms were "full of drama," filled with

inappropriate photos, and "a waste of time," so April "got it rid of it all." Now she is firmly against online identities and social media. This was evident as she expressed such thoughts as:

- "I am not really a fan of them."
- "I personally can't stand it."
- "I think personal [online] identities are fake."
- "It's a waste of time."
- "They hide behind it, the computer screen."
- "People can be really nasty online."

Despite her strong attitude toward online identities, many of her responses were still similar to the responses of the other participants. April acknowledged the positive intent of social media in terms of connecting with other people but feels that the negative outcomes outweigh the positive aspects and that "everything is used incorrectly." In describing the negative, she used such terms as "stupid fights," "porn," "spread of hatred," "racist," "people killing people," and "showing the downfall of our country and [how] our lives are going." When asked if anything positive resulted from her online identities, April responded, "Not that I remember, there was nothing, nothing at all." April stated that social media is good for professional and business purposes.

Emily. Emily is a current user of social media and has online accounts that create her online identity. Like the others, she feels her online identity closely represents who she is in *real life*. Emily's position on online identities appeared more guarded and cautious than the position portrayed by the others. When asked the very first question,

"How do you describe the term or concept of online identity?" Her first word was, "Scary." She used the word, scary, 11 times during the interview. Other phrases that indicated her guarded state included:

- "Scary that everything is online these days."
- "People are crazy."
- "[being online] can be concerning . . ."
- "Not being yourself . . . lying . . . people don't trust you anymore."

After a few questions, Emily seemed a little less guarded as she began to talk about her usage for contacting friends, having access to store coupons through Twitter, and posting "just fun things, nothing too personal." She later returned to her cautious perspective. For example, when asked about how online identities have served them, the seven other participants first responded that it served them well, mostly describing how they stayed in touched with friends and family. Emily, however, immediately talked about a story that indicated that it did not serve her well. She also expressed a unique concern about younger children seeing things online such as the 911 event and war scenes. Her concern was that these scenes could really "scare" a young child who cannot comprehend them because they have not yet learned about war or such events.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 is this: What are their perceptions of the definition and concept of an online identity? The responses to three interview questions provided the greatest amount of insight toward Research Question 1. Learning how participants defined online identity helped to understand the participants' perceptions of the concept.

The goal of the first interview question was to identify each person's definition or understanding of the concept. The first interview questions was, "How do you describe or define the term or concept of online identity?" The second interview question helped toward adding an understanding of the participant's perceptions of the concept. I purposely first asked for their definition during each interview to begin the interview as neutral as possible, before any issues or topics could arise that might influence their answers. The participants' responses to the first question provided their definitions (Table 4).

Table 4

Participants' Description or Definition of Online Identity

Pseudonym	Response
April	Online identity, I believe, is the personification that someone gives off . . . . you can really be anyone you want.
Emily	Scary. Scary that everything is online these days. It's what [you get] from all of your different profiles. You can also come up with fake identities. People do it all the time.
Heather	Basically just the person you are online. Maybe for other people it could be easy for people to hide behind the computer. There are people who are different online than they are actually in real life.
Henry	It's like putting your name out there, your government [given] name so people know who you are.
Jenny	How you want to be perceived. How you want people to think about you online. Just who you are through online activity . . . . online you can be whoever you want to be.
Mary	I would describe it as how you personify yourself on the Internet, so whether it be you are truthfully describing yourself or whether you make a fake identity describing somebody you want to be.
Sandy	How you perceive yourself <and> how others perceive you really . . . of course you have your own opinion about yourself and then millions of people who are seeing you on social media have their own opinion.
Sue	It's who you like make yourself what you look like online. How you represent yourself as a person. It could be good or bad.
Wanda	Well I would describe it as being another person or you being yourself out there . . . put a random name that represents who they are or what they want to be.

The intended purpose of the first question was to learn the participants' definitions. The purpose of the second interview question was to learn about their perceptions. The second interview question was, "What are your thoughts and comments about online identities?" While the responses to the first question provided a definition, both the first and second questions revealed the participants' perceptions. The responses to the second interview question are in Table 5. Specifically, their answers to both

questions showed that they believe there could be four types of online identities. The four types of online identities are as follows:

1. Real. This identity represents who a person is and contains factual data about that person.
2. Desired. This identity includes wishful traits, traits a person aspires to have.
3. Enhanced. This identity represents how a person wants other to perceive him or her. A person will enhance or diminish features to achieve a preferred perception by others.
4. Deceptive. This identity is a fraudulent persona, when a person deliberately creates a false identity.

Table 5

Participants' Initial Thoughts and Comments about Online Identities

Pseudonym	Response
April	I am really not a fan of them . . . . I am not fond of people online. I think personal identities are fake. I find a lot of things online are incorrect, full of drama, or eventually will get you in trouble.
Emily	I think it can be concerning later in life because once it's on the Internet, you can't take it off. So, job wise, it's scary.
Heather	It could be a good thing and a bad thing. Like, if people are using them to be who they are not [gave example of grown man preying on a little girl] . . . . You can be like who you are and express yourself, and it's like no other outlet.
Henry	Basically you get to find people, if you have an old friend . . . get in contact . . . see the person and meet them.
Jenny	It's [online identities] pretty popular. [You can be] whoever you want to be, and in my experience is not really a good thing . . . . people who aren't who they say they are, and then you end up hurting somebody, or you can end up hurting yourself.
Mary	I don't agree with being fake. I think it's wrong. I think you are leading people on . . . . I would really personally want to meet somebody who likes me for me, not somebody who's totally different just to please somebody else. Changing who you are, I don't feel it's as bad, but I feel like you should still want to be who you are to connect with people.
Sandy	I feel like you should be careful because you definitely don't want people to take you in one way than how you actually are.
Sue	I think people put too much information out there [on the Internet]. Now Facebook has the location to show where you are . . . . and [random websites] it will say turn location services on or off, like they can easily find anybody . . . . [It's bad because] there are murderers and stalkers and crazy people.
Wanda	People that actually put their true selves out there, I applaud them . . . takes a lot of guts to actually not put stuff out there, like not lie . . . People who put their identities out there, what they want to be . . . I don't like it at all . . . You really got to stop because you are going to send the wrong message . . . . and it might end up hurting that other person.

After appearing in the first two questions, these four types of identities continued to appear throughout the interviews. One specific area where the four identities appeared in almost all of the participants' answers was in the question about online versus face-to-face identity (Table 6). This question was the last question of each interview, except for the closing question, which allowed the participants to add any final comments. The question was, "When you hear the terms online identity and face-to-face identity, what comes to mind?" The answers to all three questions in Tables 4, 5, and 6 consistently included the four types of identities. Table 7 shows a count of the number of times each of the four identities appeared in the answers to the three questions.

Table 6

Online Identity versus Face-to-Face Identity, What Comes to Mind?

Pseudonym	Response
April	[With online identity] The first thing that comes to mind is fake people, trashy people. You can make yourself be whatever you want . . . . some people out there who will put on like who they really are . . . in real life, people can see you.
Emily	So online identity I think of something fake . . . . when you are face to face, people know more about [the real] you . . . . you can edit pictures on line . . . but in real life you look like you.
Heather	It is easier for people to be more comfortable online, because they are not sitting right in front of that person. Face to face is a little more intimidating because that person is right there. You don't have time to think about what you want to say or how you want to say it.
Henry	I prefer face-to-face identity because you know that person is not fake. Like they can lie . . . but not about their face [how they look]. And online, you don't know their face or if they are lying about anything.
Jenny	When you are in someone's face you can pick and point to what they are talking about . . . . but online, they don't see you , they don't know you, you could be anybody.
Mary	I see a big difference. In online identity, you don't have to see the person talking so it is easier to make up a fake identity. Where when you are face to face, you can still dress and look like a different person . . . but you can only express yourself.
Sandy	Online identity, perception. Face to face, first impression . . . . more of a true impression of how you are.
Sue	Online identity is, I mean, its' fake. Like you take a picture of your best angle, your hair done, with makeup on, your best outfit, and in person, you might just be chilling with no makeup, your hair down, and sweat pants and you're more comfortable that way. Online is who you want to be. In person is who you are.
Wanda	Online identity is kind of like first impression of everything what I person sees on your page . . . what the person thinks and usually that's why people beef it up a little bit and put lies in there. . . . I personally like face to face better because you actually see the true person.

Table 7

Number of Mentions for Each Identity Type within Three Questions

Identity Type	Q1	Q2	Last Question	Total Mentions
Real	4	2	1	7
Desired	4	3	2	9
Enhanced	7	1	1	9
Deceptive	5	4	7	16

Of interest to note is that the *real* category has the least number of mentions while the *deceptive* category has the greatest number of mentions. A person in the *desired* category is just expressing a wish, whereas a *deceptive* person is intentionally lying and may end up hurting someone, according to the participants' descriptions.

The *enhanced* category includes the concept of how someone perceives an online person. Sandy referred to both perceptions in the same sentence, "how you perceive yourself . . . how people are going to take it." Sandy later said, "If you want people to perceive you as one way . . ." indicating that a person's desired perception overlaps with how people perceive that person. Likewise, Jenny and Heather talked about wanting to portray oneself as a certain way so that others will perceive you that way. A person's intended self-portrayal, however, is not always how someone perceives that person.

For example, Wanda talked about people who put photos of expensive items on their profile to make someone think they are wealthy. In reality, according to Wanda,

most people know it is not true. Wanda commented, "I can't stand people who actually do that . . . . I don't know who you really are and you really gotta' stop."

Here is a summary of the data for Research Question 1:

Question: What are the participants' perceptions of the definition and concept of online identity?

Answer: The participants mentioned four types of online identities: real, desired, enhanced, and deceptive. The participants felt that they represented their real selves in their online identities.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 is this: What types of online identities do they identify that they create and for what purposes? All nine participants expressed that the original purpose of creating their online identities was to connect with friends and family. Table 8 shows a summary of the types of online identities they currently have or once had. Eight of the nine participants had Facebook and Instagram in high school and have continued to keep both Facebook and Instagram after high school. The previous and continued use of Twitter, Vine, and Snapchat varied among the participants.

Table 8

Participants' Types of Online Identities

Pseudonym	**When Younger Under Age 12**	**High School**	**Now at Age 18 to 21**
April	None mentioned	Facebook Twitter	Snapchat
Emily	None mentioned	Facebook Twitter Instagram	Facebook Twitter Instagram
Heather	None mentioned	Facebook Twitter Instagram Snapchat	Facebook Twitter Instagram Snapchat
Henry	None mentioned	Facebook Twitter Instagram	Facebook Instagram
Jenny	MySpace	Facebook Instagram Twitter	Facebook Instagram
Mary	MySpace	Facebook Instagram Twitter	Facebook Instagram Vine
Sandy	MySpace	Facebook Instagram	Facebook Instagram Vine
Sue	MySpace	Facebook Instagram Snapchat	Facebook Instagram
Wanda	MySpace	Facebook Instagram Twitter	Facebook Instagram Twitter

The participants did not mention any other accounts as contributors to their online identity. When I interviewed the first participant, she only mentioned her social media accounts as forms of her online identity. She did not mention e-mail or any other online accounts, such as shopping, blogging, bank accounts, gaming, or virtual worlds, as part of her online identity. I asked her if she had any of those accounts, and if she thought those were part of her online identity. I realized that I was leading the participant with my bias. After that, I did not ask that question to the other participants. The participants should identify what makes up their online identity from their perspectives, not mine. I replaced the question with, “Are there any other online identities that you currently have or used to have?” No participants mentioned any other accounts outside of the accounts listed in Table 8.

When first asked to identify their online identities, they did not mention MySpace. Those who used MySpace, usually mentioned it later, or they thought of it after the question, “Are there any other online identities that you currently have or used to have?” The participants did not have the unanimous view that the purpose of MySpace was to connect with friends. Mary mentioned that with MySpace, you had to know a person’s exact name or e-mail address, so it was not as easy to connect with people on MySpace as it is with Facebook. According to Wanda, “Back in the day,” MySpace was not really for connecting with friends as Facebook is today. Sandy stated that MySpace was more about “always trying to make your profile as cool as possible.” Mary’s response concurred, “[It] was kind of like the cool thing to make your [MySpace] page all fancy and what not.” No one has MySpace any longer because Facebook replaced MySpace, as indicated

by Mary, "Nobody really uses it [MySpace] anymore so that [MySpace] really kind of fell off . . . . There [was] no way to really connect with people . . . so that's why Facebook turned more into that."

The responses to the next two research questions will provide insight into the thought processes behind the creation of these online identities and will describe how their results lined up with their intended purposes.

Here is a summary of the data for Research Question 2:

Question: What types of online identities do they identify that they create and for what purposes?

Answer: All participants, except one, had Facebook and Instagram in high school and have continued to maintain those two identities. Other accounts include Twitter, Vine, and Snapchat. The past and present uses of those accounts vary. Five of the participants had MySpace before they were in high school, but they now use Facebook instead MySpace. Participants did not mention any other types of online identities. All participants said their purpose for creating these online identities was to connect with friends and family.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 is this: What types of thought processes do they encounter as they create these identities? The two primary interview questions that addressed this research question were:

- "Why did you create that online identity?

- "Describe any thought process you had when you created any of those online identities?"

Normally, "why" and "for what purpose" may seem like the same question. In this study, they generated two different answers. The purpose was to connect with friends and family. The resulting theme as to why they created their online identity accounts was because, as Emily summarized it, "Everyone had one." All of the participants, except one, answered in a similar manner (Table 9).

Table 9

Why They Created Their Online Identity

Pseudonym	**Response**
April	Because friends told me to get it.
Emily	Everyone had one . . . . to see my friends and see what is going on . . . . It was just like the spur of the moment. Just because everyone had it.
Heather	Basically because everyone was doing them.
Henry	I got Facebook just so I can get in contact with friends.
Jenny	When I started . . . it was the popular thing to do. You know everyone else was getting them, so I just got one because everyone else was getting them.
Mary	Well it was really popular so I just figured I'll join, see what it's about. [It was] popular, everyone had it.
Sandy	It was like a really popular thing . . . I wanna' see what it's like so I just joined it 'cuz it was popular at the time.
Sue	Yea, all my friends were talking about it, and I've seen it through, whenever I go to their house . . . and it made me want one.
Wanda	Oh, I really want one because everyone else had one.

Henry did not specifically mention the “everyone had one” answer. His answer was that he thought about getting in contact with friends and family or meeting new people. Henry mentioned he created his Instagram account because he was a photographer and enjoyed taking and posting photos. The participants’ comments on their thought processes during the creation of their online identities did not have a unanimous common response. The thought processes included what to post to present oneself in the best way, to have cool pictures, to be able to connect with friends, to add as many friends as possible, to try it, and to consider the content in light of parent access. For example, Jenny and Sue’s responses specifically talked about their parents. Jenny mentioned that her mom had to have access to her page; therefore, Jenny was cautious about what she posted. Sue said her thought process was that she hoped her mom would not find out that she had a social media page. Eventually, her mom did find out and had access to her page, which did affect the types of items that Sue posted.

The focus of the question was to learn about their thought process during the creation. As seen in the above paragraph, the participants’ answers focused on content and friends rather than the creation of an identity, although several did mention that they wanted to appear to be cool. Only two participants addressed the core of the question. Henry stated that he did not think people put much thought into the process, “Well I think most people just create, they just want to just get on the site. They want to just jump on the bandwagon. They don’t want to feel left out, so they just want to have it.” Later he added, “And then some people like if they get older, they actually think about it.” Sue

responded, "It's not much thought half the time. [As they create it,] they're just living in the moment."

Here is a summary of the data for Research Question 3:

Question: What types of thought processes do they encounter as they create these identities?

Answer: Eight of the nine participants said the main reason they created online identities is that everyone had one. The other subordinate reasons varied. The reasons centered on thinking about the content that made them look cool and having many friends.

Research Question 4

Research Question 4 is this: How have their purposes lined up with their intended results? The answers to three interview questions helped generate data for Research Question 4. These three questions were as follows:

- "Now that you have created and used these online identities, what thoughts do you have about them?"
- "How have these identities served you?"
- "What advice would you give yourself or anyone else about creating an online identity?"

Several themes emerged from the responses to those three interview questions. First, all participants, except April, stated that their online identities did help them keep in contact with friends and family. Wanda and Sandy moved a lot when they were in high school, so the use of Facebook helped them stay in touch with distant friends. Emily was able to

stay in contact with her father when he was overseas. Jenny made friends at work with whom she could stay in touch. Sandy also talked about how she was able to rekindle a friendship from long ago. As mentioned earlier, April does not condone the use of online identities. She found that having online social media accounts was “a waste of time.” It did not help her stay in contact with her friends so she “got rid of it.”

Other positive uses that stemmed from their Facebook accounts included Heather stating she found a good daycare for her child through networking on her page. Jenny mentioned how the use of social media helped find lost animals and how Amber Alerts helped find missing children. Sandy had heard about adopted children finding their parents by using the networking features of Facebook. Henry shared a story of how two friends met online and now are very close friends in “real life.” Again, April was the exception in that she could not find anything positive that came out of having an online identity. She later added that she could keep up with fashion, “The only thing is it kept me up to date on a bunch of clothes and shoes.”

After stating whether their online identities met their initial purpose of connecting with others, all of the participants turned their conversation toward a theme of *lessons learned now that I am older*. The participants discussed how they would be more careful about what they posted and with whom they became friends online. Most of the participants used terms or phrases to indicate that they were somewhat naïve when they were younger. Table 10 provides excerpts from each participant that created this identified theme.

Table 10

Excerpts That Create the Theme: Now That I am Older

Pseudonym	**Response**
April	• I tried it [Facebook] anyway . . . just as terrible as I imagined. Don't do it. It's a waste of time.
Emily	• Back then, I was writing stuff so stupid. • Just attention grabbers because I was so young. • I was posting everything, every minute. It's scary. • I was young at the time . . . nowadays I actually think about what I am doing.
Heather	• But now looking back . . . look at some of my old statuses that I wrote and I was like, "What the heck was I thinking? Why did I even think that was ok to say? Why did I think that picture was ok to put up?" • It's definitely a learning experience looking back at that stuff.
Henry	• I used to be all about it. But not anymore 'cuz I grew older, so all the childish stuff [no time for it because] now it's about achieving stuff in my life and moving [on]. • I would still create it, and I would be smart with it, not like how dumb I was.
Jenny	• [I put] too much of my business out there [online].
Mary	• Back then when you're younger, you just wanna' be like, "Oh I'm going to the mall, I'm going to the movies." You want to tell everyone what you're doing. • And I feel like now, it is just so naive and immature [to post] what I'm doing every second of every day. • Now that I'm older, I know to watch what I post . . .
Sandy	• I was not safe with that at all because . . . I didn't know the safeties and hazards of being online. I would just like add whoever. • I would definitely go back and . . . be careful who you add . . . definitely keep uploading [only] safe pictures.
Sue	• I had a self-realization moment, like why do I need feedback from everybody else about my life? So I just stopped using it.
Wanda	• Now that I look back at it, I realize I shouldn't have posted these little weird pictures and stuff like that that I put on there and stuff that I posted.

The participants offered advice for younger children who are creating their online identities. The advice closely aligned to their lessons-learned statements. Most of the advice was around the words of Jenny's statement, "Careful what you post, it could come back to you" and Henry's comment, "Careful who you friend." The next section includes the advice provided by the participants.

Five participants specifically talked about the potential effect that online identity could have on a future or current job. Both Wanda and Heather mentioned that employers do look at what potential employees post online. Emily warned, "Job wise, it's scary. You always have to watch what you post and stuff, just because they can judge you right off the bat. If you have a drink in your hand, they can say you are underage." Sandy provided an example, "If I choose to be a kindergarten teacher but uploaded a video of me getting drunk at the bar, that can definitely affect my career." According to Mary, anything online is public record, and employers can see it. Even if a student is not doing anything wrong, the student still needs to be careful of the content in every online post. Mary expressed the need to be careful with an example:

> A lot of high school students post pictures of drugs online, and they think it's not that big of a deal. Like it may not be [of] them doing it [drugs], but it's [photos of] the paraphernalia or like articles about it . . . Employers can take that into consideration . . . I don't think that they [the high school kids] really [think about it]. I don't think that anyone really tells them that it can affect you to post things like that on the Internet.

The participants mentioned other reasons to be careful such as the existence of predators and stalkers, bad things that can happen, and that every post represents who you are.

Here is a summary of the data for Research Question 4:

Question: How have their purposes lined up with their intended results?

Answer: In terms of connecting with friends, the results lined up with their purpose. All participants also mentioned that they should have been more careful about what they posted and with whom they became friends online. The most popular reason, as mentioned by the participants, for being careful was employment concerns.

Research Question 5

Research Question 5 is this: What stories do they have to share about their experiences or the experiences of others with the creation of online identities? Participants voluntarily shared stories and experiences throughout the interview. The participants focused more on experiences with online identities rather than the creation process. Even after I asked them if they had any stories to share about the creation process, their responses to that specific question again resulted in stories about the experiences, not the creation.

Throughout the interview and as a response to the specific question regarding stories about the creation process, the answers formed three categories of stories. Most of the stories listed below, except for three, appear to be about dangers or negative experiences. None of the interview questions asked for negative or dangerous situations. The participants voluntarily brought up these stories.

Category 1: Stories about themselves. These stories included:

- Emily's feelings were hurt when she read a friend's post. As it turns out, Emily misinterpreted the post. It was not about her as she had thought it was. This type of misunderstanding is a common occurrence, according to Emily.
- Someone hacked into Henry's Facebook account. Henry thinks it was due to giving too much information to someone he had not met face to face.
- Heather said that although she was a "wild child" online, she did not have any bad experiences.
- Sue explained that when she was in high school, her Facebook postings caused her boyfriend's mother to dislike Sue. Sue thought it was very unfair at the time. Now as an adult, she realizes how her postings offended the mother. Sue shared another story about a girlfriend she met online. When they met in person, Sue did not care for her.

Category 2: Stories about someone they knew personally. These stories included:

- April knew a story about a male stranger who approached her girlfriend online. The encounter became an issue. The girl asked for April's involvement, but April refused. April also spoke of a friend of hers who wanted to show off her weight loss by posting a picture of her belly. April said she thought that much more than her belly was in the picture, and it was not necessary.

- Henry talked about how his friends did not like the fact that Henry received more *likes* on his Instagram postings than did his friends. Henry also told a story about his friend who had a good experience in meeting someone online.
- Heather mentioned a bullying incident. Her relative was the victim. Heather also shared a story of another relative, whose pseudonym is Jane. Jane was upset when she found a private picture online. Jane gave her boyfriend a private picture of herself. After they had broken up, the boyfriend posted the picture online. Another story, shared by Heather, was about someone she knew who got a job through the use of her social media page.
- Jenny had a situation similar to Heather's story. Jenny's relative was upset when she found a private picture on someone's Facebook page. The relative only wanted one certain person to see the picture. She did not know how it landed on this person's Facebook page.
- Mary shared a story of how a relative, age 13 at the time, thought she was conversing online with a peer. It turned out to be an adult.
- Sandy remembered a situation where the use of social networking helped a family who was saddened by a death in the family. The conversation on the social networking platform shed light for the family that was helpful for them to deal with the situation.
- Wanda's 17-year-old girlfriend met a person online. When the girlfriend went to meet this person, he turned out to be an adult who tried to kidnap Wanda's

friend. Wanda also spoke of her relative who lost his job due to his posts on his Facebook page.

Category 3: Stories they have heard from the news or other media. These stories included media reports about:

- online bullying
- predators, such as adults preying on children
- people creating fake identities
- stories of people who become upset when a they found their private pictures posted online
- people trying to find dates online with negative consequences

For example, regarding fake identities, Heather, Jenny, and Mary all mentioned the television show, *Catfish,* while Henry mentioned the term, catfish. The show and the term refer to someone who purposely is being someone else online. Although Wanda, Emily, and April did not use the term, catfish, they provided stories of people being someone else online. Another example is from Sue:

> I have heard of people who had had like their pictures taken and said their information is put out there when they didn't put it out there. They went to delete the picture after it is out there, but somebody else has it. Snapchat, they can quickly take a picture of the picture you didn't want to be saved and then they'll post it on the Instagram and that person will get mad. That was intended for you to keep. It was just a quick note.

Here is a summary of the data for Research Question 5:

Question: What stories do they have to share about their experiences or the experiences of others with the creation of online identities?

Answer: It was not necessary to ask a specific question to hear stories about their experiences. The participants freely shared stories throughout the interview. Even when asked to share stories specifically about the creation of online identities, participants continued to share stories about their experiences after they created their online identities. The stories fell into three categories: personal stories, stories about someone they knew, stories in the media. Most of the stories were about dangerous situations or negative experiences.

Themes

Eight themes emerged from this study. The eight themes fall into two categories. The first category includes those themes that directly relate to the creation aspect of online identities. The above discussion on the results of the research questions contains the first five themes which create the first category. The second category includes three themes that do not directly relate to the creation aspect, but they do relate to the purpose of the study. The purpose of the study was to understand the participants' perspectives in order to apply the results toward an educational foundation for teaching students best practices in creating online identities. The data in this second category of themes may contribute toward building content in educational practices in teaching online identities.

Below is a list of the eight themes. The previous pages already contained a full discussion of the first five themes. For the sake of presenting all eight themes together, the first five themes are a brief overview of the already mentioned themes in the above discussion of the research questions.

Theme 1: They identified four types of online identities. The results of the participants' discussions formed four categories of online identity types: real, desired, enhanced, and deceptive. The participants felt that they represented who they are in their online identities. The discussion for Research Question 1 presents the details on this theme.

Theme 2: They created identities because everyone else did. The main reason for creating online identities is everyone else had one. The discussion for Research Question 3 presents the details on this theme.

Theme 3: Their purpose for creation was to connect. Their purpose of creating their online identities was to connect with friends and family. All of the participants, except for April, felt that their online identities did help them connect with friends and family. The discussions for Research Question 2 and Research Question 4 present the details on this theme.

Theme 4: Their thoughts while creating identities were about posts and friends. Most of the thought went into just doing it, posting things that would make them seem like themselves but also seem cool, having many friends online, and posting as much as possible. The discussion for Research Question 3 presents the details on this theme.

Theme 5: Lessons learned now that they are older. This theme is the bridge between the two types of themes. The data demonstrate the differences between what they thought when they first created their online identities and what they think now that they are older. All participants, except one, talked about how they see things differently now at ages 18 to 21 than they did when they first created their online identities during middle school and high school. The discussion for Research Question 4 presents the details on this theme.

Theme 6: Their advice: Be careful what you post and whom you friend. The content of this theme may add aspects to include when teaching about online identities. The participants created their online accounts between the ages of 13 and 15. Now that they are older, they offered advice for those young students who are currently creating their online identities.

All of the participants' advice was to be careful of what one puts on the Internet, which includes pictures as well as general postings. They also expressed concern about with whom someone becomes friends online. As discussed earlier, one reason was due to future employment concerns. Another reason is the dangers that could occur. Several participants warned that anything posted on the Internet is there forever and is permanent. For example, Emily said, "Once it's on the Internet, you can't take it off … [it's there] forever." Heather concurred, "You can't take it back once it's out there." Sue mentioned that even if a user only intends for a post to be up for a short time, anyone could capture it and repost it online forever. Table 11 contains a list of some of their phrases that best capture the essence of the reasoning behind their advice.

Table 11

Participants' Reasons: Why Be Careful

Pseudonym	Response
April	Just don't do it. It's a waste of time.
Emily	I was posting everything, every minute. Where I was. It's scary because someone could have come and gotten me.
Heather	Just be careful about what you put out about yourself . . . what pictures . . . how you portray yourself . . . what information you allow others to know about you. It can really affect you. Even if you are younger and you are trying to portray yourself that you are older. That can affect you because you'll have older people trying to talk to you.
Henry	Be safe . . . nowadays the kids, in like their generation, they are hard headed, they don't care.
Jenny	It could all come right back to you. Online is so small but it's so broad at the same time, like it can get crazy.
Mary	[Whatever you post,] they're public records.
Sandy	There are bad people on the Internet. They're not all good. You know there are predators who, you know, do look for little girls . . . and it's not a good thing.
Sue	If you don't want your mom to see it, don't put it online.
Wanda	You can put so much information on there [online]. You don't really notice. [Then,] everyone has it [all your information].

Theme 7: Parents cannot deliver advice. In talking about providing advice from their lessons learned, the first interview participant voluntarily mentioned that the problem is that high school students do not usually listen to teachers or parents when it comes to online activity. Four participants mentioned that they had a speaker or class about online behavior when they were in school. The consensus was, as April stated, "Just because you learn something in the classroom, doesn't mean you're actually going

to keep it." The next natural question was, "Who can give this advice such that students would listen?" The participants mentioned that most high school students do not listen to parents or older adults when it comes to using online identities. The participants offered other suggestions of who might be a suitable candidate for delivering advice on online identities.

The categories that received two or more responses were celebrities, a recent high school graduate, a highly respected person, and someone who experienced a bad situation. There was only one suggestion presented by only one participant. This suggestion, made by Sue, was for a peer to deliver advice. After some thought, Sue added that probably no peers would speak up unless they had experienced a bad situation. This comment places her suggestion into the previous category of someone who experienced a bad situation. Sue's additional comments also lined up with Henry and April's comments about the challenges of high school students listening to advice. Sue said, "Probably kids their own age [to give advice], but it would be hard to do that to even get in the kids' heads . . . kids mostly think they know it all." Henry had mentioned that "Kids in their generation, they are hard headed." April's words were, "Even with that, even with situations where they teach kids about how dangerous things can be, they still don't listen. Some kids just don't understand."

Theme 8: Four recurring words. During the coding and analysis process, I identified several recurring words or phrases that were beyond the above themes. Some of those words were *lies, trust, insecure,* and *bored.* There were other recurring words, but it may be more relevant to look at those words mentioned by a majority of the

participants. Five of the nine participants mentioned four words or phrases that were the theme of a story. Below is a description of the words and phrases used by five or more of the participants. Table 12 shows who mentioned each word or phrase. This theme may not have a direct bearing on whether any curriculum should contain inclusion of these topics; however, their pronounced existence seemed noteworthy.

Table 12

Four Recurring Words Mentioned by Five or More Participants

Pseudonym	**Habit**	**Fake**	**Drama**	**Hide**
April	√	√	√	√
Emily		√	√	√
Heather			√	√
Henry	√	√		
Jenny	√	√	√	
Mary		√		
Sandy		√		√
Sue	√	√	√	√
Wanda	√			

The four most recurring words were as follows:

- Habit: Five participants mentioned that being involved in their online identities became a habit. April and Henry said that so many people “get caught up” in the habit. Wanda and Jenny called it an “addiction.” Sue said that people “lose themselves” and become “obsessed.”

- Fake: This word was probably the most used term in all of the interviews. The word, fake, appeared 40 times in seven interviews. Some of the usage of the word, fake, was to describe the *deceptive* category in the four online identity types (see Research Question 1).
- Drama: Five participants stated that there was a lot of drama in the use of online identities, which included gossip, people with hurt feelings, intentionally harmful words, friends who acted differently online than they do in person, and unresolved arguments.
- Hide: Five participants mentioned the word, "hide," as in hiding behind the computer or keyboard. This phrase described how people would act differently because they could hide, how they did not have to be accountable for their actions, and how dangerous people start out by hiding behind the computer.

Summary and Transition

The goal of this study was to answer the primary research question, "What are high school graduates' perceptions or viewpoints about creating online identities?" Five subquestions helped to answer the main question. In general, the participants felt that an online identity could be (a) real, who a person actually is; (b) desired, what a person aspires to be; (c) enhanced, how a person wants others to perceive him or her; or (d) deceptive, when a person deliberately creates a false identity. The participants stated that they represented their real selves in their online identities. The types of online identities mentioned were Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Vine. The reason they

created an online identity was because it was popular, and everyone else did it. Not much consideration went into the idea that they were creating an identity. They, instead, thought about what they should post and how they could obtain as many online friends as possible. Their purpose was to connect with friends and family, and in general, they felt their identities served their purpose. Now that they are older, they realize that they were “naïve” and should have been careful about what they posted and whom they accepted as friends online. This caution is particularly important because of employers who look at online profiles and because of other possible dangers. The participants believe that high school students will not listen to the advice from parents or older adults.

Throughout the process of sharing the above thoughts, each participant freely shared stories about experiences with online identities. All of the participants shared stories about themselves, someone they knew personally, or someone they heard about in the media. Most of these stories were about dangers or negative experiences. Many of the stories contained recurring words that may not have a direct relationship with the concept of creation. These words, however, may provide supporting data in understanding the participants' overall perspectives of online identities. The four most used recurring words were habit, fake, drama, and hide or synonymous variations of those words.

The purpose of gathering these data was to provide information that educators might apply toward creating curriculum for students to use technologies that involve online identities. The next chapter provides an interpretation of the findings and their implications for social change. The next chapter will also include recommendations for future studies and limitations of this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the perspectives of working high school graduates regarding the creation of online identities. The need for this study stemmed from Schmidt and Cohen's (2013) prediction that, in the next decade, the number of virtual identities will exceed the number people on earth. This prediction means that there will be a change in the basics of online identities, as people's entire lives will be on a worldwide platform (Schmidt & Cohen, 2013). This projected growth also supports Seery's (2010) call for educators to find a new model to teach self because the traditional methods may not apply to the online world. The rapid pace of this predicted growth in online identities reinforces Hollandsworth et al.'s (2011) sense of urgency for educators to keep up with advancements in technology.

The findings of this study provide data toward building the foundation for curriculum that addresses the topic of online identities. The majority of responses from the study participants created a unified picture within each topic area and generated eight themes, as presented in Chapter 4. Key findings included the participants' definitions of online identity as real, fake, perceived, or desired. Their purpose for having an online identity was to connect with others. The reason they created their online identities was everyone else had them. Their focus was not on creating an identity but rather on the content of their posts and the people with whom they connected. Now that they are older than when they created their online identities, their perspectives are slightly different. They are more aware of the importance of being careful about their online activity than

they were in high school. The participants agreed that parents are not a good option for providing advice to students about online activity.

This chapter begins with an interpretation of the findings. After a discussion of limitations of the study, recommendations and social implications follow. The social implications section provides a connection between the results and potential curriculum development strategies for teaching about online identities. A conclusive statement closes the chapter and the entire study.

Interpretation of the Findings

The purpose of the five subquestions was to answer the main research question: What are the perspectives of working high school graduates regarding the creation of online identities? The responses created eight themes. Chapter 4 contains the details of these themes:

1. Types of online identities: The participants described four types of online identities: (a) a real identity, (b) a desired identity, (c) an enhanced identity, and (d) a deliberately deceptive identity.
2. Reason: The reason they created an online identity is everyone else created one.
3. Purpose: Their purpose for creating their online identity was to connect to family and friends.
4. Thoughts: Their thoughts, while creating their identity, centered on the content of their posts and having many friends.

5. Lesson learned: As adults, they have a better understanding of the importance of their online actions than they did when they were younger.
6. Advice: From their lesson learned, their advice is to be careful what one posts and whom one friends.
7. Advice conveyance: Young teenagers are more likely to listen to advice from celebrities, peers, recent graduates, or recent victims of online crime than from parents or adults.
8. Recurring words: Four recurring words in the participants' vocabulary, while describing online identities, were habit, fake, drama, and hide.

This section contains a discussion of these findings in the frame of the literature and the frame of the theoretical foundation of the conceptual framework (Figure 1).

The Findings and the Literature

In general, the findings from this study aligned with the current literature. There did not appear to be any noteworthy conflicts with the current literature; however, the content of the findings will begin to extend the literature. The literature review in Chapter 2 outlines four general categories and four focused categories regarding online identities. Table 13 contains a snapshot of those categories. Included in Table 13 is an indication of the findings that aligned with the literature categories and the findings that extend the literature. The next two sections provide an explanation of the connections in Table 13.

Table 13

Alignment of Literature Review with Study Findings

Literature Category	Findings Align	Findings Extend
General – Education	√	
General – Social Interaction	√	
General – Adult Citizen		√
General – Possible Dangers	√	
Focused – Logistics		√
Focused – Anonymity	√	
Focused – Avatars		√
Focused – Social	√	√

Alignment with the literature. The four general categories of online identity outlined in Chapter 2 are education, online social interaction, adult citizenship, and possible dangers. The interviews in this study included conversations about social interaction and possible dangers. The participants did not mention any educational online identities or use of online identities in education. This lack of mention supported Knight and Rochon’s (2012) statement that students use social networking sites more for emotional social connectivity than for academic purposes. Afshar, Zeraati, and Damaliamiri (2015) also found that the topic of education held a minority share of the social media conversation that occurred among young adolescents. The researchers asked 250 students, ages 11 to 15, to describe their topics of online conversations. Only 20% of

the respondents mentioned any ties to school subjects. The next section addresses the lack of reference to the category of adult citizenship. The other two categories of social interaction and possible dangers are also a part of the supporting concepts in the conceptual framework (see Figure 1). The conceptual framework includes the problems and concerns and the related literature that surround the topic of online identities.

Possible dangers, problems, and concerns. As discussed in Chapter 2, in the realm of problems and concerns, Paradise and Sullivan (2012) and Taraszow et al. (2010) found adverse effects of online identities in the areas of employment, personal relationships, and privacy. The same three areas surfaced in this study's interviews. In terms of employment, five of the nine participants voluntarily brought up the concern about how an online posting can influence employers. In regards to relationships, Sue talked about a situation when her Facebook photos affected her relationship with her boyfriend, due to his mother's reaction to the photos. Emily mentioned her hurt feelings when she read a post that she thought was about her. Concern for privacy was most prevalent in Henry's story of how someone hacked into his account. Several stories, such as Heather and Jenny's descriptions, were about how their friends thought certain photos were private and did not understand how they could end up on the Internet for public viewing. Paradise and Sullivan and Taraszow et al. stated that users compromise their privacy because they allow strangers to access their social networking pages. The content of Theme 6, of this study, parallels that statement. In Theme 6, the participants' advice was, as Henry said, "Careful who you friend." Crook and Pastorek's (2015) study supported two of the above findings. Crook and Pastorek identified a need for students to

understand the impact of their online identities on their potential employment. The researchers had the students view their online profiles from the perspectives of employers. This exercise increased the students' awareness of the influence of online information on employers' criteria for hiring. The participants in Crook and Pastorek's study, like the participants in this study, were surprised at how their private information ended up online.

The topic of other possible dangers appeared in both the related literature and the findings of this study. In Chapter 2, a narrowed lens on the literature on online identities showed four focused categories of anonymity, avatars, logistics, and social (Figure 3). Of those four themes, anonymity closely relates to the topics of such dangers as cyberbullying and predators. A discussion of these dangers surfaced throughout the interviews, as summarized under Research Question 5. In the literature, anonymity played a role in dangers and levels of trust in the online world (Sirivianos et al., 2014). Anonymity allows users to hide (Santana, 2011). Several researchers related anonymity to cyberbullying (e.g., Sevcikova et al., 2012; Srivastava et al., 2013; Sticca & Perren, 2013). Barlett (2015) found in his study of 181 undergraduate participants that anonymity was a strong predictor of cyberbullying. In the nine interviews for this paper's study, the participants did not use the word *anonymous*. Instead, the concept of anonymity fell in their descriptions of fake identities, which is the fourth category of deceptive identities, described in Theme 1. The words *fake* and *hide* were recurring words in Theme 8. Spencer-Scarr (2010) proposed that educators need a new way to look at anonymity in

the online world. The strong presence of the mention of the words *fake* and *hide* throughout the interviews supported Spencer-Scarr (2010) suggestion.

Social interaction. The social aspect, in the four general categories, surrounds activity with social networking pages. The main purpose of such activity, stated in the literature, was social and emotional connectivity (Knight & Rochon, 2012). Theme 3 of this study showed that all nine participants stated that their main purpose was to connect with friends and family. In the focused category, the social aspect in the literature included research on multiple types of identities (e.g., Alvermann et al., 2012), embellishment of positive attributes (e.g., Verni, 2012), and online identity misrepresentation (e.g., Huang & Yang, 2013). The participants in this study also talked multiple types of online identities throughout the interviews. The four types of identities mentioned in Theme 1 were the following:

1. Real: Factual data: Who a person actually is
2. Desired: Wishful traits: What traits a person aspires to have
3. Enhanced: Modified features: How a person wants others to perceive him or her
4. Deceptive: Fraudulent persona: When a person deliberately creates a false identity

These four identities form a spectrum from deliberately honest to deliberately deceptive. The literature includes research on the individual types within this spectrum. The enhanced identity type is similar to Verni's (2012) findings of how users desire to embellish their positive attributes. The desired, enhanced, and deliberately deceptive

identity types support Huang and Yang’s (2013) study results, where they found that 72% of their population purposely misrepresented themselves. Keipi, Oksanen, and Räsänen (2015) discovered similar results. In their two-source data gathering method, Keipi et al. found that young teenagers with low self-esteem tended to use anonymity to purposely misrepresent themselves. The participants in this dissertation’s study all stated that they represented themselves realistically, yet Table 7 shows that the participants mentioned the other three types of identities 34 times (82%) versus only seven (12%) mentions of a real identity.

There is another similar discrepancy in the participants’ responses. The responses in Table 6 of this study show that the participants saw a clear difference between an online identity and a face-to-face identity, yet the participants all stated that they represented their true selves online. The current literature includes a discussion of online versus offline presentation (e.g., Gonzalez & Hancock, 2008; Mesch & Beker, 2010; Young, 2009). There is disparity in the relationship between the two types of identities. Young (2009) called for more data to understand the relationship between online and offline identity. This potential divide may be due to a limitation of the study, as described in a later section regarding limitations of the study. Regardless, the discrepancy in the participants' answers matches the disparity discussed in the literature.

Summary of literature alignment. In summary, the findings of this study aligns with the current literature in terms of possible dangers, anonymity, a lack of educational reference, and parts of the social aspect, such as the participants’ purpose of connectivity. While certain themes in the social aspect matched the current literature, other findings

within the social aspect begin to add to the literature. The same holds true for the categories of avatars, logistics, and adult citizenship (Table 13).

Extension of the literature. The findings begin to extend the literature in three ways. First, a dichotomous situation appeared in the conversations that created the four types of identities. Second, the participants in this study did not mention some of the online identity concepts in the literature, such as avatars, logistics, and adult citizenship (Table 13). Third, some of the participants' responses may start to add data toward ideas on teaching the new self that Seery (2010) suggested for the online, digital environment.

Dichotomy in intentionality. The first extension of the literature is the dichotomy in the intentionality of online identity creation. The participants did not put much thought into the creation of their online identity, yet they identified others who intentionally posted factual, modified, wishful, or fraudulent features to create an online identity. Those intentional features formed the four categories of online identity as described under Research Question 1 in Chapter 4. According to the content of the participants' responses, online identity creation is both unintentional and intentional. In creating their online identity, the participants did not intentionally make a choice among the four types of identities, yet they were keenly aware of these distinctions in the identities of others.

Missing concepts in participant interviews. The participants of this study did not mention several of the concepts in the literature. This lack of mention may not be an indicator of any significance. At the same time, the absence is worth recognizing. For example, the literature contains studies on avatars as a form of online identity. A recent study by Fong and Mar (2015) discussed how the popular use of avatars may have social

consequences on users' real lives. No participants in my study referenced avatars, gaming, virtual worlds, or any other synonymous terms for the use of avatars as a form of online identity. The participants did discuss fake identities but not in the realm of avatars. This lack of mention could be for several reasons, such as this specific population does not engage in virtual worlds or their schools did not utilize avatars in the curriculum. Another possibility, though, is that the participants did not see avatars as a type of online identity.

Similarly, the participants' conversations did not include any comments regarding the logistics of online identities, such as protection, privacy, management, and legal considerations (see Figure 3). Henry shared a story about his Facebook account being hacked, but he knew the incident occurred due to his conversations with a person he never met face-to-face. Henry shared the story as his "be careful who you friend" lesson rather than a remark about privacy or protection. There were two slight references to the privacy strand of the logistics theme. Jenny and Heather each shared a story of when a friend was surprised upon seeing a private picture posted on the Internet. The second reference is the four participants who expressed concern about "trust" (Appendix J). These references were more about the social aspect than privacy and protection.

The inclusion of these stories may be part of their journey from student into adulthood. At this stage, the participants seemed to relate all of their online identity experiences only with the social aspect. As recent high school graduates, perhaps they have not had enough online identity experience as an adult citizen in the online world. This limited experience may also explain why there was no mention of the topics of adult

citizenship, such as e-commerce or any professional blogs or websites. The exclusion of the topics of logistics and adult citizenship may be a result of the characteristics of this specific population. Another explanation may be that there is a transitional phase in online identity when students leave high school and begin adulthood. If it is a transitional phase, educators should consider preparing students for this transition.

Toward teaching a new self. The third extension in the literature is using the data to help inform curriculum. Another part of this potential transitional phase appeared in the unanimous remarks about lessons learned (Table 10). All nine participants commented on errors in the way they handled their online identities when they were younger. They did not put much thought into the idea that they were creating an online identity. Most of the thought went into what they should post and how they could obtain as many friends as possible. Here, then, is where the data add to the literature, feeding data toward Seery's (2010) call for a new model for teaching self.

Summary of literature extension. In summary, this study's results start to add data towards the call for teaching about a new online self (Seery, 2010). The duality in awareness of online identity types, the lack of mention of avatars, logistics, and topics in adult citizenship, and the aspects of transitioning into online adulthood may all be indicators of needed content when teaching about one's online self. These data supported Seery's (2010) statement that traditional methods of teaching about self do not apply to the online world. The data also showed a gap in the participants' thought processes while creating an online identity. This gap matches the gap in the literature. The literature review in Chapter 2 reveals that most of the literature on online identity has been about

the *after* effects. The gap has been in understanding the *before* aspect, what students think before they create their online identities. In this study, the participants did not think about the creation process. Their stories, similar to the literature, were more about the after effects.

The Findings and the Theoretical Foundation

The previous section linked the findings of this study with the supporting literature. This section continues with an interpretation of the findings in terms of the theoretical foundation. The theoretical foundation of this study's conceptual framework (Figure 1) consists of Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory and Walther's (2011) CMC theory. Six of the eight themes generated from this study align with those two theories. A potential third theoretical construct emerged from the results of the other two themes. Table 14 provides a summary of the connections among the findings of this study, the two foundational theories, and a potential third theory.

Table 14

Alignment of Theoretical Foundation with Study Findings

Literature Category	Social Identity Theory	CMC Theory	A Third Theory
Theme 1: Four types of online identities	√	√	
Theme 2: Why? Everyone else did it	√		
Theme 3: Purpose: To connect	√		
Theme 4: Thoughts: What to post, who to friend	√		
Theme 5: Lesson: Now that I am older			√
Theme 6: Advice: Be careful		√	
Theme 7: Parents cannot deliver advice			√
Theme 8: Four recurring words: Habit, fake, drama, hide		√	

Social identity theory. The basis of Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory is how a person behaves to be part of an in-group. The participants in this study created their online identities to be like everyone else. Per the content of Theme 2, the main reason the participants of this study created their online identity was everyone else did it. Their purpose, in Theme 3, was to connect with friends, which means they want to be part of this online social group. The responses that formed Theme 4 indicate that while creating their online identities, the participants thought about how to present their image in the best way, to have cool pictures, to be able to connect with friends, and to add as

many friends as possible. These behaviors demonstrate the basis of Tajfel and Turner's theory in that the participants wanted to be part of the in-group. Another aspect of the social identity theory is the consideration of how a person wants people to perceive that person. In Theme 1, the participants identified one of the types of online identities as how a person wishes others to perceive him or her. The results of Theme 1, 2, 3, and 4 indicate that Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory applies to the social behaviors with online identities with this study's participants.

CMC theory. Walther's (2011) CMC theory also supports several of the outcomes of this study. CMC theory focuses on the lack of social presence and nonverbal cues, allowing a giver or a receiver to adjust a message or adjust a trait. An example is Emily's misinterpretation of a post, which is a common occurrence, according to Emily. The intention of a post does not necessarily match the receiver's interpretation. This misconception also emerged in the advice in Theme 6, in Henry's words, to be "careful what you post" because "it could come back to you." For example, as Mary said, a person can post what seems to be an innocent picture, but employers can misread the picture.

The aspect of no social presence in CMC theory ties into the recurring words of fake, drama, and hide as found in Theme 8. No social presence also ties into the identification of the four types of online identities in Theme 1. Walther (2011) stated that a giver or receiver could exaggerate or discount any components of a message or traits of the message giver. This changeable feature, along with a lack of nonverbal cues, can create an environment where drama can develop. People can hide behind the keyboard or computer, as April and Sandy stated, in this no-social-presence environment. No social

presence means someone can hide his or her true self, even to the extent of presenting a false identity. A deceptive identity is one of the four types of identities that created Theme 1. The other three categories were real, desired, and enhanced. Without social presence, users can create desired and enhanced identities. The results of Themes 1, 6, and 8 indicate that Walther's CMC theory applies to the behaviors with online identities within the realm of this study.

A potential third theory. The two foundational theories for this study supported six of the eight themes that developed from the participants' responses. The emergence of the other two themes, Themes 5 and 7, might warrant another theoretical basis for consideration, at least for future studies. Theme 5 shows that the participants had a realization that they were naïve when they were younger, and they should have been more careful about what they posted and whom they accepted as friends. As stated in Theme 7, during their teenage years, the participants did not necessarily listen to parents or adult speakers who provided advice on this topic. The gap here is that, as young teenagers, the participants received guidance about online behavior but did not heed the advice. Now that they are older, they seem to realize the importance of the information.

Uncovering the reason for this divide is beyond the scope of the study; however, a brief discussion may be appropriate, as the purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of high school graduates regarding online identity creation. Placing a theoretical lens around Theme 5 can provide potential foundational material for curriculum. According to McKenna (1993), one potential explanation of why people think bad events will not happen to them is an illusion of control. The participants said

they not careful when they were young teenagers. This lack of the perception of the need to be careful may be due to McKenna's reference to an illusion of control. The participants may have had a misperception about the amount of control they had in operating their online identities.

Another potential explanation for the participants' realization of their naivety when they were younger is the effects of brain development. Giedd et al. (1999) and Sowell, Thompson, Holmes, Jernigan, and Toga (1999) concur that certain regions of the frontal cortex can continue to develop until the age of 20. This region handles decision-making aptitude and emotional intelligence (Killgore & Yurgelun-Todd, 2007; Sowell et al., 1999). Adolescents do not have the same reasoning maturity as adults, as the frontal lobes correlate with cognitive functioning (Sowell, Thompson, Tessner, & Toga, 2001). This theory provides a potential explanation of why all nine participants of this study mentioned that they are more aware of the realities of the online world now that they are older. The theory could also support the reason they did not heed advice when they were young teenagers. Mary called it being naive. Henry called it being dumb. Heather wondered, "What the heck was I thinking?" Further research may help to confirm or disconfirm this apparent gap in the thinking processes between young teenage years and young adult years in the online world. The data from Themes 5 and 7 are worth further examination through the lens of the illusion of control, brain development, or another theory.

Limitations of the Study

There are several potential limitations to this study. First, the relative alignment of the majority of responses may indicate that only a certain type of person volunteered to participate. For example, the participants, in general, did not have any poor experiences themselves but did know of stories about others who had poor experiences. Perhaps those who have had a bad experience chose not to participate. Another example is the possibility that those who create fake identities did not volunteer for the study. According to the participants of the study, they represented their real selves online as opposed to creating one of the other three types of identities, which were desired, fake, or perceived identities. Perhaps those who volunteered for this study were only people who believe they represent their true selves.

Another explanation for this relative alignment in answers is the face-to-face environment of the interviews. The participants may have had poor experiences or created fake identities but may have been reluctant to discuss it. Although I ensured anonymity and confidentiality, the possibility still exists that they did not want to discuss any aspects that they thought would not look good for them. Huang and Yang (2013) found that 72% of participants in his completely anonymous, quantitative study admitted to purposefully engaging in some type of misrepresentation online. Perhaps the face-to-face nature of the interviews, in this study, inhibited disclosure of any purposeful online misrepresentation. Finally, the prospect of a face-to-face interview may have deterred people who intensely engage in online identities. These people may be more comfortable

communicating online than in person. If so, then asking questions about online identities in a face-to-face environment is a limitation of this study.

A third limitation is the transferability of the findings. I provided rich details of the answers and specific demographics to allow for transferability to similar situations; however, these details do not mean that the findings are transferable to every high school graduate who is working in the northeast region of the U.S. While the interview responses contained similarities, each person had their own personal background and a unique set of experiences. Certain stories and situations may be transferable to other similar situations. The goal of this qualitative study, however, was more to explore and understand a social or human process (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013) than to transfer the data.

Social Implications

The purpose of this qualitative study was not to find answers but rather to discover trends or patterns to assist educators in helping students to create safe and effective online identities. The themes that emerged from this study provide a piece of the foundation. Future studies that follow up on the results of this study will increase the foundational basis for educational curriculum.

Applying the findings to educational curriculum could affect social change on the micro-, macro-, and megalevels as described by Kaufman et al. (2003). On a microlevel, the data can help educators to model behavior for students to follow in creating effective online identities. The introduction of Chapter 2 describes the hidden curriculum as teaching and learning that occurs but is not part of any written standards (Goddard, 2002;

Posner & Strike, 1974). This learning includes the absorption of information that occurs during daily activities (Çubukçu, 2012). Teachers, as role models, can exhibit productive uses for an online identity and overcome the reason stated in Theme 2 for creating an online identity, which is that everyone else created one. This effort, in turn, can help students realize they are creating a new kind of self (Seery, 2010) and not just reacting to the action of their peers. The responses from the interviews showed that the participants created their identities, without much thought, because everyone else did it. As well, teachers can model proper posting protocol to address the "be careful" lessons of Themes 4 and 5.

On a macrolevel, the data from this study, together with further research, can create a foundational basis for schools to build practical teaching methods. For example, schools may want to help students benefit from understanding that they are creating an identity in the virtual world and that thoughtful consideration should go into the creation process. Students are creating an online self (Seery, 2010) that will follow them into the adult world, which consists of more than just social networking sites. One immediate application is the information derived from Theme 7. In Theme 7, the participants said that young teenagers do not listen to their parents or adults when it comes to advice about online behavior. Four participants mentioned they attended a session at school regarding online behavior, but the sessions did not appear to have an impact. The students identified other people that may be successful in delivering advice. These options included celebrities, a recent high school graduate, a highly respected person, and a peer who

experienced a bad situation. This information may be of value to schools that are currently putting forth effort to help their students be responsible digital citizens.

As with any megaoutcome, the megasocietal impact is not measurable in the immediate future. Researchers and schools can extend the data from this study and continue the efforts to help students live in the online world as responsible digital citizens. Placing graduates into the adult world, who live balanced digital lives, can help reduce their risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of cybercrime. On a long-term, megalevel, producing responsible digital citizens could contribute to the quality of online life and the reduction of cybercrime statistics.

Recommendations

From this study, there are two recommendations. One recommendation is for educators to utilize some of the data to help students begin to manage their online identities. The other recommendation is to expand this study's data through further research.

The results of this study showed that students do not put much thought into the concept that they are creating an online identity; as such, educators should begin to help them realize and manage their online identities. One method may be for educators to provide an opportunity that allows for a constructive realization of the spectrum of the four types of online identities. For example, students learn about and discuss different people during their various courses:

- Politicians in government classes
- Celebrities in social studies or current event classes

- Historical figures in history classes
- Criminals in criminology or justice classes
- Professional business people in business classes
- Professional athletes in physical education classes

Often, students find data on these people from online profiles and online identities. A study of these different types of people, through their online identities, provides an opportunity for students to construct a spectrum of identities from deliberately honest to deliberately deceptive. Students could engage in conversation about the differences and begin to manage and realize their identities relative to the spectrum they just created.

The results of this study also generated questions and new areas of inquiry for future studies. The goal of this study was to provide data to help inform curriculum regarding online identities, and these recommendations point toward the goal of continuing to inform curriculum development efforts.

The data collection method for this study was a face-to-face interview. The respondents may be more forthcoming with complete answers in an anonymous situation than in a face-to-face environment. For example, all of the participants stated that they represented their true selves online. This conflicts with the findings that a majority of users purposely misrepresent themselves online (Huang & Yang, 2013). Perhaps the face-to-face method deterred participants in this study from providing full answers. To address the limitations of a face-to-face environment and to provide greater transferability of the results, a future study might include a completely anonymous platform, such as an online quantitative questionnaire. Areas of inquiry for the questionnaire might start with the

eight themes generated from this study. The inclusion of the data from the eight themes may help begin transferability of the data to a larger population.

As mentioned earlier, the results in Theme 5 could benefit from a study with a different theoretical foundation. All of the participants had the realization of how much they did not know or realize when they were younger, despite the advice they received. The participants identified a difference in the level of understanding between the time they were young adolescents and the time that they were adults. In a study by Mascheroni, Vincent, and Jimenez's (2015), their young adolescent participants stated that they believed they were fully aware of the risks of online postings and behaviors. This full awareness of the risks included sexual offenders and the ramifications of posting inappropriate photos. A future study might endeavor to find if there is a consistent gap between young adolescents and young adults in their understandings of the risks of online behavior. A future study on this potential gap might use a theoretical foundation of the illusion of control (McKenna, 1993), brain development (Giedd et al., 1999; Sowell et al., 1999), or some other theory that supports an explanation of the gap. If researchers found a consistent gap, then the foundational theory would be an important piece to consider when designing curriculum.

Future studies could also begin to include the influence of variables. The participants in this study were ages 18 to 21, but age was not a variable within the study. Variables to consider in another study might include time spent online and the number or types of online identity platforms. Expanding an understanding of these variables would begin to provide a larger picture of online identity use. Another variable to consider is

age. A similar study administered to young teenagers and adults in their late 20s might support or extend this study's findings. For example, the participants in this study discussed their past behaviors and past thinking processes. Patton (2015) stated that people might not be able to answer questions about the past with accuracy. Asking young teenagers about current behaviors may support, extend, or even conflict with this study's findings. Surveying adults in their late 20s about their online behaviors may reveal more data about experiences with adult citizen aspects of online identities. The data could help define learning needs to prepare students for adult life online.

Finally, a deeper look at the four types of identities in Theme 1 and the four recurring words in Theme 8 might add data toward informing curriculum. This exploratory study uncovered the perception of real, desired, enhanced, and deceptive identities. A future study could confirm or extend these findings and help understand the duality of the intentional and unintentional nature of choosing an identity type. A study that examines the recurring words in Theme 8 may add data towards understanding the duality of intentionality in online identity creation. The four words were habit, fake, drama, and hide. The concepts of fake, hide, and drama might tie into the four types of identities. If a future study also shows that the recurrence of those four words holds true with a greater population, then educators can begin to add those aspects into the curriculum.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of recent high school graduates regarding online identity creation. The goal was to apply the results of

the study toward helping educators teach students to use online identities safely and effectively. The results of this exploratory study will not solve the entire challenge of teaching about self in the online world, but the results have two uses. First, the eight themes that emerged from the study introduced areas for future studies that can enhance the understanding of the phenomenon of online identity creation. Second, parts of the eight themes may be relevant for immediate application, such as, in Theme 7, the suggested role models to provide advice to students. The eight themes are as follows:

1. Four types of online identities: Real, desired, enhanced, and deceptive
2. Reason: Everyone else did it
3. Purpose: To connect
4. Thoughts: What to post and who to friend
5. Lesson: Now that I am older
6. Advice: Be careful
7. Deliver advice: Not parents
8. Four recurring words: Habit, fake, drama, hide

The themes indicate that the participants brought up four types of online identities: (a) real, who a person actually is; (b) desired, what a person aspires to be; (c) enhanced, how a person wants others to perceive him or her; or (d) deceptive, when a person deliberately creates a false identity. The participants stated that they represented their real selves in their online identities. Their purpose of their online identity was to connect with friends and family. The reason they created their online identities is everyone else created one. In general, they did not put much thought into the idea that

they were creating an online identity. Instead, their focus was on their posts and the number of online friends they could obtain. As young adults, they now look back at their online behaviors during their young teenage years and realize they should have more careful than they were when they were younger. Participants did not heed advice regarding online behavior given during school sessions. Ignoring the advice may be due to the participants' belief that high school students will not listen to the advice from parents or older adults. All of the participants shared stories about themselves, someone they knew personally, or someone they heard about in the media. Many of the stories contained recurring words that may merit further research. The four recurring words used most often were habit, fake, drama, and hide.

The data from this study align with the literature and the theoretical foundation of the conceptual structure that framed this study. At the same time, some of the data show a need or a gap. The social aspect of online identities was a key recurring theme throughout the literature and the results of the study. The lack of mention by the study participants of any uses of online identities as an adult citizen shows a gap in preparing students for online adulthood. The four types of identity align with varying results from other studies, but the duality of intentionality shows a need to understand the creation thought process. From a theoretical perspective, Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory supports the participants' need to be part of the in-group, hence creating their online identities because everyone else created them. Walther's (2011) CMC theory helps to explain the participants' misinterpretations, their reasons why they found it necessary to be careful, and their explanation of the ability to create desired, enhanced, and deceptive identities.

Future studies may need to include a theoretical framework to help understand the age-difference gap in fully comprehending the impact of online identities. The participants did not comprehend the advice they heard as young teenagers, until years later when they became young adults.

The social implication of the data ties to the reality that students live in the physical world and the online world. Traditional educational methods for living in the physical world may not apply to the online world, particularly in dealing with the concept of self (Seery, 2010). Schmidt and Cohen's (2013) prediction that the virtual population will outnumber earth's population reinforces the need for educators to address the concept of self in the online world (Seery, 2010). The data from this study can inform curriculum and expand the landscape of the literature toward the social change goal of helping students grow and thrive in the online world in a safe, effective, and ethical manner.

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Appendix A: Letter of Invitation and Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study. The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding about online identity creation. The study's goal is to understand the perspective of high school graduates, ages 18 to 21, who are in the workforce. Your input may help K-12 educators teach students how to safely and effectively use online identities in school. This form is part of a process called informed consent to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

Summary

Your choice to participate or not to participate will have no bearing on your employment or employment status. Your participation is completely voluntary. Your identity will remain confidential. If you choose to volunteer, you will participate in a one-on-one interview, lasting approximately 1 hour, asking you for your opinion, perspective, and thoughts about creating an online identity. Since it is your opinion, there are no wrong answers. It is your opinion and perspective that matter. The interview will occur in the <insert location name, city, state>. As a thank you for your time, you will receive a $30 gift card to Walmart or Target (your choice).

Details

Lisa Koh-Herlong, who is a doctoral student at Walden University, is conducting this study. The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding about online identity creation from the perspective of high school graduates, ages 18 to 21, who are in the workforce.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, please sign this form and return it to the researcher. If you do not have scanning capabilities, see note on page 2 for other methods for consent. **Please respond by: <insert day, date>.**

- You will receive a notice of receipt of your interest in participating.
- The researcher will contact you to set up an interview. Interviews will occur during the week of: <insert dates>.
- An interview will last approximately one hour. It is a question and answer session. Here is an example of the type of questions: What are your thoughts or comments about online identities?
- Interviews will occur <insert name of location, city, state>. You will receive the exact room address after your acceptance to participate in the study.
- The researcher might take notes; however, she will also audiotape the session to ensure she does not miss any of your responses.
- After the content of your interview has been transcribed, you will be asked to review the content and may request changes if needed. This will be done via e-mail, and you will be asked to respond within one week. Please allow approximately 30 minutes for this review.

- Once initial interpretation of your interview has been completed, you may be contacted a second time and asked to verify that your intentions are represented accurately. This will be done via e-mail, and you will be asked to respond within one week. Again, please allow up to 30 minutes for this review.
- At the end of your completed interview, the researcher will provide you with a $30 gift card to Walmart or Target (your choice) as a thank you for your time.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Your participation choice is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study, and your choice will have no bearing on your employment or employment status. If your circumstances change, you have the right to withdraw from the study. The study requires only a limited number of participants. Interested participants will be accepted into the study first based on eligibility, then based on first come, first serve on receipt of Consent Forms by the researcher. Every person who volunteers will receive notice of acceptance or nonacceptance within five days of the deadline date <insert deadline date>.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study: In the context of this study, being in this study will not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. Your identity will remain confidential. The study results will include your responses but without your name. Your identity will be kept confidential through use of a pseudonym. Your participation will help inform educators in the use of educational technologies that include online identities. Real-person perspectives are an invaluable asset for educators.

Compensation: Participation in the study is purely voluntary. There is no payment for participation; however, as a thank you for your time, you will receive a $30 gift card to Walmart or Target (your choice), at the end of a completed interview.

Privacy: The results of this study will be part of a published dissertation. Your name will be anonymous and your identity will in no way connect to your interview responses. The researcher will not use your responses for any purposes outside of this research project. The researcher will not include your name or anything else that could specifically identify you in the study reports. The researcher will secure any identifying data by keeping all records and recordings password protected on hard drives or jump drives, not posted online or uploaded to any website. Data will be on file for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions: If you have any questions now or in the future, you may contact the researcher. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Walden University's approval number for this study is 04-01-15-0011076 and it expires March 31, 2016.

At the start of the interview, the researcher will provide you with a copy of this form; however, you may also wish to keep a copy now.

If you decide not to be in the study, you do not need to take any action.

Statement of Consent

Please submit this form by: <insert date>.
Feel free to keep a copy of this document for your files.

I have read the above information regarding the study on high school graduates' perspectives on online identity. I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below and returning a signed copy to the researcher, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms as listed on pages 1 and 2 of this document.

Other options to send consent: If you do not have a scanner or ability to scan and e-mail, you may cut and paste this Statement of Consent and type your name on the signature line. The e-mail will be an acceptable form of consent. The researcher will obtain your signature at the interview.

Printed Name of Participant: ____________________________________

Date of Consent: ____________________________________

Participant's Signature: ____________________________________

Participant's e-mail: ____________________________________

Participant's phone number: ____________________________________

Researcher's signature: ____________________________________

My contact preference is: (check one):

- □ Phone call (write # if different from above):
- □ Text message (write # if different from above):
- □ E-mail
- □ Any or all, no preference

Appendix B: Letter of Cooperation

Three business owners in an identified area of the northeast region of the United States, who have employees in the age range of 18-21, received a Letter of Cooperation. When I initially conversed with a business owner, I explained the contents of the Letter of Cooperation and the research proposal. Then I sent the Letter of Cooperation to each business owner, explaining that, if the business owner agrees to allow the employees to volunteer to participate, he or she is to sign and return the Letter of Cooperation to the researcher. All three business owners return a signed copy of the letter.

Letter of Cooperation

<Insert Business Owner Name>
<Insert Business Name and Address>

<Date>

Dear Lisa Koh-Herlong:

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled High School Graduates' Perception of Online Identity Creation with my employees at <Insert Business Name>. As part of this study, I authorize recruitment of volunteer participants from my eligible employees who are high school graduates ages 18 to 21. I also agree to the following processes:

1. To keep my employee contact information confidential, I will distribute your Letter of Invitation and Consent Form to all eligible employees.
2. Those who are interested will contact you directly. Those who are not interested will simply not respond.
3. I will send a reminder two days before the deadline date.
4. You will contact those who responded, "Yes" with details and you will set up the interview times.
5. You will conduct one-on-one interviews with each participant. The interviews will not occur when an employee is on the clock. Each interview may last approximately one hour.
6. Interviews will occur <insert location>.

7. Participation is purely voluntary, and there is no payment or money exchange among the participants, you, or <name of business>. As a thank you, you will provide a $30 gift card to each participant who completes the interview.
8. If needed, you may call or e-mail participants later for clarification on their interview responses.

I also understand that individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. Their choice to participate has no reflection on their employment or employment status. My organization is volunteering to help and our responsibilities are only #1 and #4 as listed above. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am an authorized officer of my company, who can approve this research with my employees, and I confirm this plan complies with the organization's policies. I understand that the data collected will be part of your dissertation but the participants' identities and my organization's name will remain entirely confidential. You may state that my business is in the retail industry located in the northeast area of the United States, without revealing the name of my company. No one outside of your dissertation supervising faculty/staff will be aware of identities.

Sincerely,

<Authorized Official's Name>
<Title>
<e-mail/phone>

Appendix C: Text Provided to Business Owners for E-mails

The plan was to provide the business owners with text for two e-mails to send to their eligible employees. The first e-mail asked for participation and contained the Letter of Invitation and Consent Form. The second e-mail was a reminder of the upcoming deadline date. I did not use the second e-mail because I had enough participants before the deadline data arrived.

I provided prewritten text for the body of the e-mail. Below are e-mails from me to the business owners. These e-mails provided my recruitment materials for the business owners, which they sent to their eligible employees.

E-mail 1: Letter of Invitation and Consent Form

Subject: Letter to send to your employees

Dear <Business Owner's Name>:

Thank you again for allowing your eligible employees to volunteer to participate in my doctoral research study. Also, thank you for volunteering to send out my recruitment materials to your eligible employees. As discussed, attached is the Letter of Invitation and Consent Form for you to send or hand to your employees who are high school graduates, ages 18 to 21. I have provided text for the body of the e-mail. Since the deadline date to respond is <day>, <date>, it would be helpful if you could send the e-mail within the next 1-3 business days.

Subject: You are eligible to participate in a doctoral research study
Text for body of e-mail: A doctoral student is conducting a research study. <Business Name> has agreed to allow our employees to volunteer to participate. You are receiving this e-mail because you are eligible to participate in the study. Below is the call for participation from the researcher.

From the researcher:

Thank you for your consideration in participating in this study regarding the creation of online identities. In brief, participation is voluntary and requires a face-to-face interview that may last between 45-90 minutes with some follow-up feedback. As a thank you for your time, I will provide you with a $30 gift card to Walmart or Target (your choice).

Please see the attached Letter of Invitation and Consent Form for full information and details. If you have any questions, my contact information is below and in the attached document.

Thank you for your consideration,
Lisa Koh-Herlong

E-mail 2: Reminder E-mail

Subject: Reminder e-mail of deadline date – to send to your employees

Dear <Business Owners Name>:

As discussed, please send a reminder e-mail to your eligible employees on <day>, <date>, which is two days before the deadline to respond. For your convenience, I have provided text for you.

Subject: Research study response due date is in two days

Text for body of e-mail: This is just a reminder that if you are interested in participating in the research, on high school graduates' perspectives' on online identity creation, that the deadline date to respond "yes" is in two days, <day>, <date>. If you need more details or a copy of the Consent Form, you can contact the researcher directly.

If you already responded, then disregard this notice.

Thank you,
<Owner's Name>

Appendix D: Acknowledgment of Receipt of Consent Form

After receiving a Consent Form from an interested participant, I sent the following information to the participant:

Subject: I received your consent form. Thank you.

Dear <Participant Name>:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in my doctoral research study. Your participation will really help to further the research field in educational technology, particularly in the scope of online identities. I will be contacting you shortly to set up the interview time. If we reach the limit on number of participants, you will instead receive a notice that you are on the wait list and details regarding a wait list.

If you are selected for an interview, after we have set up a mutually agreed upon date and time, you will receive a confirmation e-mail/text of the date and time with the exact location where the interview will take place.

As a reminder, the population for this study is high school graduates who are currently 18-21 years of age. If you do not fall in that category, please let me know immediately. Also, remember you may opt out at any time without consequence. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Lisa Koh-Herlong
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Technology
Walden University

Appendix E: Confirmation of Interview

Each participant who set up an interview received the following communication from me within one business day of setting up the interview:

Subject: Your interview date, time, and location

Dear <Participant>:

Your interview date, time, and location are as follows:

Day, Date: < filled in for each interview>
Time: < filled in for each interview>
Location: < filled in for each interview>

Please send me a confirmation that you received this information.

If you are unable to make the date and time or if anything changes in your circumstances that may affect your participation, please contact me as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Lisa Koh-Herlong
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Technology
Walden University

Appendix F: Wait List Communication

If I received more than 12 Consent Forms from eligible participants, I was planning to put the surplus of participants on a waiting list. Since I received exactly 12 Consent Forms, I did not utilize this waiting list strategy. If I received more than 12 Consent Forms, the plan was to send this communication:

Subject: You are on the Wait List for the research study

Dear <Interested Person's Name>:

Thank you for volunteering to partake in my doctoral research study. I am so fortunate in that I reached my initial number of participants needed for the study. Since I know circumstances change, some participants may need to drop from the study. Unless you specify differently, I would like to put your name on the wait list. If someone does drop from the study, I will contact you immediately to see if you are still available. If you are, we will set up an interview date at that time.

Thank you again for your willingness to volunteer. If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact me.

Sincerely,

Lisa Koh-Herlong
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Technology
Walden University

Appendix G: Participation Recruitment Checklist

Chapter 3 (pp. 74-81) contains the process for recruitment of participants in a narrative form. Below is a process flow, or checklist, of the steps in an at-a-glance format.

1. I sent the Letter of Cooperation (Appendix B) to business owners.
2. Business owners returned a signed Letter of Cooperation to me.
3. I sent business owners the Letter of Invitation and Consent Form (Appendix A), along with text for the body of the e-mail (Appendix C) that accompanied the Letter of Invitation and Consent Form.
4. I had prepared a reminder e-mail to send to the business owners, but I did not need to use it (Appendix C).
6. As I received each Consent Form, I sent an Acknowledgment of Receipt of Consent Form (Appendix D) to the interested participant.
7. I contacted the interested participants and set up an interview.
8. I sent a Confirmation of Interview (Appendix E) to the participant.
9. Since I received exactly 12 Consent Forms, I did not need to maintain a waiting or send any wait list communication (Appendix F).

Appendix H: Interview Process

This list below is the checklist I used during each interview.

Introduction

- Introduce self
- Thank participant for coming, create a welcoming environment
- Review the Consent Form to reiterate:
    - Purpose
    - Anonymity
    - In no way will their employment
    - Approximately 45-90 minutes, depending on their answers
    - I will be taking notes and recording and ask if it is ok
- Gain permission and agreement that it is okay to continue.
- Ask, "Do you have any questions before we begin?"

Restate Purpose

The purpose is to gain your perspective about creating online identities. With technology, there are many great opportunities to learn, network, reflect, have fun, and communicate online. More and more, we tend to create online identities in order to engage in these activities. The purpose of this interview is to understand the perspective from working, high school graduates about their creation of online identities.

Ask Interview Questions

See Appendix I.

Close Interview

- Remind participant there may be a follow-up communication for clarification.
- Tell participants to let me know if they would like a copy of the results at the completion of the dissertation.
- Ask for preferred communication method, for example text, e-mail, voice, or other.
- Ask for any further questions from the participant.
- Thank participant and hand participant the gift card.
- Stand up and walk participant to the door.

Appendix I: The Interview Questions

The interview process contained the introduction, the questions, and the closing of the interview. The questions began with the content in this document.

Beginning Statement

In all of the following questions, I am interested in your perception, your description, and your experience. This means, then, that every answer you give is the right answer because it is about you, your perspective, and your experience.

Interview Questions

1. How do you describe the term or concept of online identity?

2. What are your thoughts or comments about online identities?

3. What types of online identities have you created?
   Elaborate:
   - Describe or tell me about them.
   - Describe any experiences you have had with them.
   - Are there any other online identities that you are thinking about creating? If so, please describe.

4. This is a before and after question, so it has two parts. I will read both parts to you so that you know what they are. Then I will ask you each question separately.
   a. If you can remember, describe any thought process you had when you created any of those online identities?
   b. Now that you have created them and used them, what thoughts do you have about them now?

5. How have these identities served you?
   Elaborate:
   - How have you used them?
   - Describe instances when they worked well, not well, neutral, or no impact.

6. What stories would like to share about your experiences in creating your online identities?

7. What advice would you give to yourself or anyone else about creating an online identity?

8. When you hear the terms *online identity* and *face-to-face* identity, what comes to mind when you think of online identity creation?
   Elaborate:
   - Share any experiences you have had or someone you know has had.

9. What other comments do you have about creation of online identities?

Appendix J: Excel Coding Spreadsheet

The coding process, described in Chapter 4, included the use of an Excel spreadsheet. The results of the spreadsheet helped to formulate the answers to the research questions and to discover other emergent themes. The table on the following pages contains the content of the Excel spreadsheet. The structural format of the following pages is slightly different from the original spreadsheet. For example, the original document displayed the codes across the column headings. In the next pages, the column headings contain the participants' names. This format change makes it easier to read across the multiple pages.

The coded words in the original spreadsheet were in the order of how they appeared during the process. During the analysis, I shaded the cells in different colors to differentiate the emergent themes. For this Appendix J, I grouped the color-coded results into the categories, removed the color-coding, and provided a heading for each category. The three headings are as follows:

1. Research Questions 1-5 and Themes: These codes generated answers to the research questions and helped in the discovery of other themes.
2. Five or More: These codes are not part of the emergent themes because they do not have a direct connection to the main research question. These concepts and words appeared during five or more interviews.
3. Less Than Five: These concepts or words appeared two to four times during the nine interviews. These codes also do not have a direct connection to the main research question. Chapter 4 explains the purpose for the inclusion of these last two categories.

	April	Emily	Heather
Research Questions 1-5 and Themes			
Fake	personal ids fake fake, trashy - 2x can be fake F2F but can tell fake people every day somebody's being fake - 2x	fake identities - 3x something fake -2x totally fake - 2x to be fake	
Connect	stay in contact connect people wanted to communicate	talk to friends	way to contact people
Dangers	get you in trouble spread of hatred predators	could have come and gotten me bullying	online bullying
Perception	Personification	the world to see	want to be
Everyone else	friends told me to	everyone had one	everyone was doing them
Younger v. now	don't do it waste of time	back then I was so young I was young at the time	now looking back a learning experience
Someone else/ different	be anyone you want	turns you into somebody look like somebody totally different can be totally different different profiles really different online different in person	not who they say they are are different online
Advice / Careful	did not pay attention don't listen don't do it	not post everything not post as much posted more back then watch what you post	careful about what you post just be careful be careful important to be careful - 2x
Job		job wise, it's scary about a job	job opportunities job interviews jobs…look at your

(*table continues*)

	April	Emily	Heather
Five or More			
Hide	hide behind it they don't see you	don't try to hide hide behind a computer	don't have to face that person not sitting in front of that person not hiding behind hide behind - 2x
Drama	drama with my high school full of drama all drama [unclothed] and drama people arguing lots of fighting + more	creeper [people] break up … crazy	a lot of drama drama of the moment use Facebook to argue
Habit	all the time		
Fake	See first row	See first row	See first row
Less than Five			
Private Personal	it's private, only you it's personal space	it's like personal	
Bored			
Time dependent			[now] not a lot of time
Real life		the real world real friends when you are real in real life f2f is more real	in real life
Trust		don't trust you anymore	can't always trust
Lie		turns into lies you are lying	
Pretend			
Cool		pictures . . . cool tweet about it … cool cool to post might like the cooler person	

(*table continues*)

	Henry	Jenny	Mary
Research Questions 1-5 and Themes			
Fake	fake person - 4x actually fake fake their identity + 6 more	fake persona	fake - 8x
Connect	contact with friends get in contact	find someone stay in touch	way to connect easier to connect connect with people
Dangers	Hacked	Bullying	don't understand the dangers
Perception		want to be perceived personal online	others see you
Everyone else	jump on the bandwagon	everyone else was	everyone had it
Younger v. now	I grew older childish how dumb I was	too much of my business	back then naïve and immature now that I'm older
Someone else/ different	use somebody's name different from f2f	someone you're not someone else portray someone else	somebody you want to be somebody else - 3x somebody different - 2x
Advice / Careful	be safe be smart don't accept friend request	don't put too much business	public records watch what you post
Job			go to get jobs employers

(*table continues*)

	Henry	Jenny	Mary
Five or More			
Hide			
Drama		a lot of drama	
Habit	people stuck on their phones	online is pretty addictive	
Fake	See first row	See first row	See first row
Less than five			
Private Personal			
Bored			[during] commute
Time dependent	don't have time don't really have time	more time now	
Real life			
Trust			
Lie	they can lie f2f … can't lie		could be lying
Pretend			pretend - 5x
Cool			thought it was cool that was cool cool to have

(*table continues*)

	Sandy	Sue	Wanda
Research Questions 1-5 and Themes			
Fake	they're fake	it's fake	not true selves
Connect	rekindle friendships	keep in contact	keep in touch
Dangers	predators bully, bullies, bullying - 12	bullying murderers and stalkers	
Perception	perceive yourself how others perceive you want people to perceive you + 6 more	Perception	
Everyone else	cuz popular at the time	all my friends talking about it	everyone else had one
Younger v. now	I didn't know the safeties go back and	self-realization moment	now that I look back I shouldn't have
Someone else/ different	completely different	somebody else it's not really them	somebody else - 2x
Advice / Careful	careful post and who you contact if never had contact careful + 14 more	mom [measurement] everything you post	careful out there careful - everything you put up
Job	affect my career	jobs will look	job wise cousin lost job

(*table continues*)

	Sandy	Sue	Wanda
Five or more			
Hide	hide behind a keyboard don't have to deal with real life consequences	can't hide behind screen	
Drama		too much drama fight	
Habit		lose themselves get caught up	addicted - 3x addiction - 2x
Fake	See first row	See first row	See first row
Less than five			
Private Personal			
Bored	when I'm like bored	they're bored	when bored first thing you go to
Time dependent	more stuff occupying my time		
Real life	like in real life be themselves in real life like this in real life but real life consequences	real selves	
Trust		it's hard to trust	trust person in front of you
Lie			lie about stuff put lies in there
Pretend			make believe
Cool	coolest thing - 2x coolest picture as cool as possible thought of as cool I was cool this is cool really cool	cool backgrounds want to be cool	