

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND THE #VANLIFE MOVEMENT

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An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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Every day individuals interact with others, create relationships, and shape the way they make sense of who they are. In recent years, these interactions are increasingly taking place through technology; people rely on the Internet in general and social media in particular to interact with others. As a result, the formation and performance of one's identity takes place in an online environment more frequently. While a great deal is known about how people create and maintain their identities in face to face situations, there is much to still be understood about technologically contextualized interactions, and how those shape an individual's sense of identity.

Social media has become an integral part of people's lives (DeMers, 2017), as they are seen as a way of creating and maintain our 'personal brand' (Kerpen, 2016). A total of 71% of the American population ages 18-24 are active on Instagram as well as 35% of the U.S. adult population, which has risen 7% since 2016, making it the most notable rising social media trend of 2018 (Smith & Anderson, 2018). This master's thesis aims to add to existent knowledge by elaborating on and exploring existing theories of identity formation through the case study of the #vanlife movement on Instagram.

#Vanlife is an increasingly popular ‘way of life’ that is made up of individuals who leave behind a life of stability and responsibilities to travel across the country in a van that has been converted to meet almost all of their living needs (Branman, 2018). The #vanlife movement exists primarily on the social media site Instagram. With the hashtag function of Instagram creating a place for #vanlife members to connect, create a sense of community, and collaboratively make meaning (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Mead, 1934) about the #vanlife movement, this hashtag serves as an ideal case study for the exploration of online identity performance. Identity, as will be explored in great detail below, is a socially situated process.

This project assessed the #vanlife movement through a content analysis of #vanlife images, as well as semi-structured interviews with members of the #vanlife movement. Using grounded theory, the data was analyzed to gain insight into how identity was constructed. Results reinforced the performative nature of identity in the context of #vanlife experiences. Additionally, findings underlined the importance of the role of the perceived audience within the process of identity performance. Instagram also introduces unique difficulties in accounting for the perceived audience. Additionally, the #vanlife movement is commonly perceived as subversive in the way members live their lives. This thesis found that there are portions of the #vanlife movement that can be considered subcultural and subversive, but not to the extent that the #vanlife movement is initially perceived to be.

The platform of Instagram is central to the understanding of the #vanlife movement and its ability to exist and grow. The affordances provided from Instagram play a central role in the definition of #vanlife. Moreover, the changing nature of these affordances shows the need to continually revisit theories and assumptions made about identity. With each new social media site that is introduced, updated, or altered, the process of identity creation and maintenance

changes. As such, this thesis provides a starting point for ongoing research into creating a better understanding of the nature of online identity performance.

DEDICATION

For my partner in life, Michael. I would not have made it through the past 8 years without you. Thank you for keeping me afloat through the calmest waters, the roughest seas, and everything in between.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

You open your eyes for the first time, your day has begun. You scan your surroundings with your freshly awakened senses and look out your window. You see the sun rising over a distant mountain range, the early morning dew still catching the gentle daylight. Or perhaps you see the ocean, as the waves roll and hug the beach, seeming to inch their way closer and closer each time. For most, this sounds like a fantasy, an unimaginable reality, or a temporary vacation at best. For those living the #vanlife, however, this is reality. This is their day-to-day life.

#Vanlife is a socially mediated movement (Monroe, 2017) whose existence consists of a social media presence and a physical, offline presence, with each relying upon the other to exist. It consists of young adults living out of vans or other mobile vehicles with the space and capacity to live in. Members of this movement use Instagram as a platform for sharing, broadcasting, and communicating about their lifestyles. For some, this may mean sharing the process of converting a normal van into their new home. For others, this may mean documenting their journey across the country, documenting their experiences, joyful moments, challenges, and everything in between. They may choose to do this through posting their own pictures, or they may choose to comment on images posted by other #vanlife members. The defining feature of the #vanlife movement is that the offline, physical commitment to living in a van and the online, social media presence are reliant upon each other. In this sense, one who lives in a van but does not share images in association with the hashtag #vanlife would not be considered a member of this movement.

This thesis will explore how members of this movement use Instagram as a platform to express their ways of life, as well as communicate and interact with other members of the movement to create a shared sense of meaning. Through this process of meaning making, members of the movement construct and maintain their individual identities, as well as the collective #vanlife identity. #Vanlife members have been able to use Instagram as a way of creating shared meanings, ideas, and experiences about what it means to be a #vanlife member. It is through these interactions that the #vanlife identity is created, shaped, and maintained. By investigating the #vanlife movement and how members construct an individual and collective identity via Instagram, this thesis will shed light on the processes of identity formation in social spaces, building on extant knowledge about online identity performance.

The #vanlife hashtag also allows individuals who share the same lifestyle, or the ideas and values promoted by the movement, to connect. The ability for social media to connect individuals from different backgrounds and geographical areas has been recognized as an important consideration for understanding modern interactions (Meyrowitz, 1985), and the #vanlife movement is no different. People connect by liking a post labeled with the hashtag #vanlife, commenting on a #vanlife member's post, or any similarly interactive process of sharing and engaging with other's experiences or dialogue about and within the movement.

Although it is just captured by a hashtag, the #vanlife movement is more than just a movement; it can be seen to qualify as a form of a subculture. This thesis will show that members have labeled it being a subculture in some respects, but also not being all that different from the dominant culture. This thesis will also show that the #vanlife movement can be seen as providing people with a space to exchange and construct ideas that run counter to the dominant culture. Through the interactions and identity performances that constitute the #vanlife

movement, members are creating a subcultural community that defies the norms and behaviors of the ‘greater society’. Additionally, the findings from this thesis will show that these meanings both align with and counter dominant narratives about home, beauty, and things that are visually appealing. Through these connections, people make meaning about the #vanlife movement through the images that they see.

Interactions within the #vanlife movement are the main focus of this research. With each interaction in the #vanlife movement that occurs through social media, meaning is made. The very concept of identity, as will be explored further below, engages in an idea of front and backstage aspects of one’s self (Goffman, 1959). Each interaction and environment in which we behave will influence the identity presented and maintained within that situation. This relies on the assumption that identities are not fixed and concrete; rather, they are continually shifting and changing with each interaction and setting. The nature and structure of communication through and among these social media platforms has influenced the way interaction, identity, and relationships are conceptualized and viewed (Papacharissi, 2010), as these platforms have inexorably changed how people interact.

This thesis examines the interactions amongst members of the #vanlife movement as they are constructed through the social media platform of Instagram. As will be explained below, a framework for understanding these interactions will be built through the following sections; social media, Instagram, #vanlife, and #vanlife as a movement.

Social media

Digital media have become a significant aspect of our lives. As of February 2018, seven in ten Americans used social media for a variety of reasons (Pew Research Center, 2018), including

connecting with others via messaging or connecting services and obtaining information and news. Some platforms place information sharing as a main goal, while others place the ability to connect privately and efficiently as the top priority. The initial goal of Instagram as a platform was to give users a sense of being in moments that were shared by others and be able to quickly make and post photos and videos (Conik, 2016). Social media is now used for a variety of reasons, by a variety of individuals. The Pew Research Center also found that 71% of 18 to 24-year-old American young adults use Instagram, and of those, 60% use this platform daily (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Within recent years, a great deal of our meaningful interactions have begun taking place through technology.

Considering the prevalence of social media use in people's lives, it is no surprise that people have begun to use these platforms to convey to the world who they are in a hyperconnected manner. Considering the ongoing, constructed nature of identity, people can be said to be creating and maintaining a personal brand (Kerpen, 2016) through social media platforms. These identities, or personal brands, do not exist in isolation from others, meaning each different or separate identity that one has is connected to all other identities. One's identity on Instagram will be connected to their Facebook identity or their offline identity. The degree to which these connections occur may vary, but regardless of scale, these connections do exist. On social media, a large majority of social media platforms enable people to interact with others. An individual's identity is created and maintained through social interactions (Marwick & boyd, 2011), which places great importance on such interactions.

The dictionary definition of social media is a website or other online means of communication that is used by large groups of people who share information and develop social and professional contacts. Therefore, social media platforms are inherently social, as much of their motivation and goals for use are for users to interact with others. Over time, social media platforms have fundamentally altered the ways in which people interact. For example, the @ symbol, which is commonly used on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, provides users the ability to directly interact with others (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Additionally, the hashtag symbol, #, is a keyword that is preceded with the # symbol (Marwick & boyd, 2011), which allows users to find other posts associated with the same keyword.

When the hashtag sign (#) is placed before a word on Instagram, it makes that word findable to anyone who searches for it (Daer, Hoffman & Goodman, 2014). Through the use of these social media affordances, members can be a part of groups or communities in a way that wasn't possible before these platforms were introduced. The generation of keywords in association with topics or events can be described as collaborative tagging; one example of this collaborative tagging is a folksonomy (VanderWal, 2007). Folksonomies connect bits of information in a way that allows social media participants to be in the driver's seat of making sense of and understanding information, rather than that understanding and meaning being imposed on them (Potts et. al., 2011). For example, hashtags on Instagram enable users to search for a specific hashtag, view the associated content with that hashtag, and make their own meanings about that compiled content. Ultimately, folksonomies are places where meaning is made in a collaborative manner, and hashtags are one place where this occurs. This means that rather than information finding its way to users, the users are able to actively construct and form

meaning on their own terms. Through the tagging process, members are able to contextualize their posts within the array of other posts associated with same tags.

As a result of the new affordances for interacting that are provided by social media, the process of identity construction and performance has also changed. The collaborative and interactive nature that social media fosters can be seen to provide users with new opportunities which are not provided by face to face interactions between and among people. The role of social media and its affordances within these interactions has become an integral part of individuals' lives (DeMers, 2017). Social media allow individuals to present themselves to the world, and it has become an increasingly significant venue for doing so for much of the population. Over time, the specific social media platforms are introduced and regularly altered. The social media platform that will be analyzed during this research is Instagram.

Instagram

Instagram was originally created in 2010 (Lagorio-Chafkin, 2012) and has become an important social media platform for much of the U.S. population. When it first began, Instagram was created to share moments through pictures posted by users in real time (Paquet, 2019). In the past few years, Instagram has grown in popularity, especially in the U.S. A total of 71% of the American population ages 18-24 actively use Instagram, as well as 35% of the U.S. adult population, which is an increase of 7% since 2016, making it one of the fastest growing social media platforms today (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Women use Instagram more than men, Black Americans use the platform more than those who are white or Hispanic, those who have a college diploma are more active on Instagram than those with some or no college education, and those who live in urban areas use Instagram

more than those who live in suburban and rural areas (Pew Research Center, 2018). These demographics are important to consider when understanding those who are active and make up a majority of the Instagram population. In this sense, these demographics demonstrate that a majority of the Instagram population is relatively young, well-educated, dominantly female, and more likely to be part of certain ethnic populations' online behaviors. When discussing the ways in which identity is constructed and maintained through this platform, it is important to consider whose identities are being considered and discussed.

Instagram is a picture-based platform. Instagram users take pictures and share them through the platform, accompanied by a description if they so desire. While the platform can be viewed via desktop, tablet, and mobile phone, images can only be uploaded through the mobile phone app, highlighting the mobility of the platform itself. Instagram users can upload images in two ways. The first option is to take a picture through their phone's camera and upload the image from their camera roll. The second option is to use the camera function within the app itself and share the image directly. After uploading but before sharing the image, the user can choose to edit the images (Chester, 2018). Users are able to edit the colors, brightness, contrasts, and countless other visual alterations, as well as apply specific filters to their images (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen & Carter, 2015).

The filters offered by Instagram are especially popular, even leading to the creation of a #nofilter hashtag to highlight when a user does not use one of the 40 filters currently in use. The filters are updated frequently and have names such as Clarendon, Juno, and Ludwig. These filters alter the images in distinct ways, changing the brightness, contrast, and many other properties of the original image. For example, the filter Clarendon intensifies the shadows and brightens the

highlights in a photo, while the filter Aden creates low contrast, which softens the image to provide a pastel, warm look (Messieh, 2018).

Through the offering of filters and its easy-to-use editing tools, Instagram has become known for the presentation of images that show the user and/or their possessions in the best possible light. Users can alter their skin tone, the color of their environment, making it look darker or lighter, warmer or colder, fading out unwanted aspects and highlighting desirable objects with the push of a button. This is an important consideration to keep in mind while discussing human interactions, relationships, and the performance of one's identity. This opportunity to tailor or doctor the ways in which users present themselves (Chester, 2018), users' identities will alter how others view them, and that in turn can also influence how these others experience and make sense of their own identities.

Instagram also provides its users with the opportunity to post videos. Within the process of posting videos, filters and other alterations to the video itself are still possible, allowing the user to change the way the video is presented to their audience. In addition, there is a function on Instagram called a story. The story function of Instagram can include both images and videos. Stories are temporary, and last for only 24 hours. These stories do not pop up in the normal feed of Instagram posts; users have to go to the top of their feed page to find the smaller circle icons with the other users names, and click on them to view these temporary posts. Consistent with the rest of Instagram, these stories can also be altered with filters, brightness, contrast, etc. Instagram's emphasis on visual images and representations of individuals and their experiences makes this platform unique from other social media platforms which tend to rely more heavily on text-based representations of one's self.

Like most other social media platforms, Instagram includes a hashtag option. On Instagram, users would usually only see posts by those that they follow. With this hashtag function, users are able to search for terms or items of interest, and posts associate with the term's hashtag will appear. Because of this, users who posts pictures will commonly attach hashtags to their posts that capture the picture's meaning in an effort to help other users find their image. Additionally, users will often rely on hashtags to add additional layers of meaning to their pictures, e.g., #nofilter or #Mondayblues that could not have been captured by the picture itself.

This hashtag tool can then create a shared space for interacting with the same hashtags, therefore providing the opportunity for creating communities and groups. For example, someone can find others who are interested or participating in similar things as they are by finding other users who post images with the same hashtag. These accessible and familiar areas online can serve as a location for individuals to interact with others, in turn creating relationships with like-minded individuals. Within the #vanlife movement, the hashtag function provided by Instagram serves as a valuable tool for members in being able to find other #vanlife members and collectively create and maintain a #vanlife identity.

#Vanlife

The #vanlife movement is an ideal example of how Instagram provides its users with the affordances to interact and communicate with others. As mentioned above, the hashtag #vanlife movement is made up of individuals who leave behind a life of stability and concrete responsibilities to travel across the country or world in a van that has been converted to meet almost all of their living needs and who document this lifestyle using Instagram and the #vanlife

hashtag (Branman, 2018). The #vanlife is typically referred to as a way of life, or as a way of exploring an alternative way of living (Benson, n.d.).

The #vanlife movement can be seen as an alternative way of living, both physically and mentally altering the way members carry out their life. Not only are people physically removing themselves from the comfort and ease of a fixed home, but they are also changing the way they live their lives. Simple, daily tasks, such as preparing a meal or taking a shower become much more difficult when residing full time in a van. In addition, the possession of belongings and material things changes when living in a van, as buying a couch or large painting becomes more difficult if you do not have the space for it. Because of this, the movement can be thought of as more of a long-standing culture rather than just a temporary trend (Benson, n.d.). Identifying with a deeply entrenched change in lifestyle is different than just aligning with what shoes people are wearing that month or what phone to buy that year. Those who are part of the #vanlife movement commit to an overhaul of their life as they know it.

The distinction between living in a van and living in a van while actively using the hashtag #vanlife is the use of social media to present these experiences. It is paramount to distinguish between van life and #vanlife, where #vanlife relies on Instagram for sharing and communicating, and subsequently constantly altering the way one presents their experiences living in a van. The trend began in 2011 when Foster Huntington, a Ralph Lauren designer in his mid-twenties, left his comfortable job in New York to live in a 1987 Volkswagen van (Monroe, 2017). With a passion for photography, Huntington ended up taking images of his van quite frequently (Moss, 2014). Huntington used Instagram to document his experiences, with most of his images representing the behind the scenes, genuine, day to day life of living on the road. In his posts, Huntington included the hashtag #vanlife (Feldman, n.d.). Huntington's use of the

hashtag was a tongue in cheek reference to rapper Tupac's "Thug Life" (Cottell, 2018). This reference was humorous to Huntington as the notion of Thug Life has always been associated with glamor and materialism, while the #vanlife lifestyle was anything but that. Huntington saw Instagram and the use of the #vanlife hashtag as a unique opportunity to showcase his experiences. One of the ways he funded his new lifestyle was through his personal that he connections that he had at Patagonia, where he was occasionally hired for photo projects to promote the outdoor brand (Chubb, n.d.)

The #vanlife movement is usually associated with the millennial population, with a common motivation found within the members is the appeal of leaving 9-5 jobs and enjoying a free lifestyle living out of a van (Benson, n.d.). The millennial age group is often referred to as being attracted to a lifestyle resembling the nomadic, hippie-esque lifestyle, with this lifestyle consisting of traveling and exploring cheaply. Considering the demographic active on Instagram and the demographic commonly associated with the #vanlife movement, the posts associated with #vanlife provide valuable insights into why this demographic is strongly connected to the movement. This is an important consideration when seeking to understand and make sense of the movement as a whole, and how the members are forming and maintaining their #vanlife identities.

Through the #vanlife hashtag a community was formed. #Vanlife members used the hashtag #vanlife in association with images of their lifestyles and experiences.

#Vanlife, as a concept and as a self-defined community, is primarily a social-media phenomenon. Attaching a name (and a hashtag) to the phenomenon has also enabled

people who would otherwise just be rootless wanderers to make their travels into a kind of product (Monroe, 2017, para. 9).

Instagram has afforded members and nonmembers of the #vanlife movement the opportunity to share their experiences and explore the #vanlife lifestyle, meaning people could learn about the #vanlife movement through the content present on Instagram. Without Instagram, #vanlife would not have existed. In other words, without Instagram, the #vanlife movement would not be the movement that it is today.

Through the filter and hashtag function, Instagram in particular has provided #vanlife members a way of sharing this way of life in a way that is appealing and intriguing (Taylor, 2017). Even though some #vanlife members have a presence on YouTube, Instagram has been home for the #vanlife movement hashtag. Most images associated with #vanlife consist of beautiful scenery, simple lifestyles, and blissful travelers (Guscott, 2017). #Vanlife attempts to “aestheticize and romanticize the precariousness of contemporary life” (Monroe, 2017, 6), relying heavily on the materials that make up contemporary life. Due to the emphasis of images and visual representations on Instagram, this platform was the best fit for Huntington’s goal of sharing images about his experiences.

Upon selecting #vanlife on Instagram, the viewer is taken to a page full of intriguing and attractive images of the #vanlife lifestyle. Images provided through this link vary greatly: some may show vast landscapes, sunsets, beautiful beaches, and aesthetically pleasing scenes. This became the norm associated with the hashtag #vanlife due to its roots: Huntington’s passion for photography and newly adopted lifestyle, in addition to his motivation to share it with others, which partially came from the fact that Patagonia was funding him to do so. Through the

showcasing of experiences on Instagram, the #vanlife movement has been associated strongly with the beautification of the movement, such as the use of editing and filters, along with primarily including images of visually appealing scenery, and the realities of living in a van full time.

#Vanlife has been compared to hippie living which occurred in the 1960's, where a popular lifestyle was to live in VW busses (Marrin, 2017). Similar to #vanlife, the hippie movement was made up of mostly young, college-aged individuals whose motivation for changing their lifestyle was to reject and defy the dominant idea of the American life. They placed little value on material items and saw embarking on adventures as being more important (Hall, 1968). These goals align closely with the motivations of Foster Huntington, as he has expressed his dedication to living a minimalist lifestyle, distancing himself from the reliance on material items for happiness and fulfillment (Moss, 2014), and can be said to reflect the overall sentiment of the #vanlife movement.

Interactions among #vanlife members is central to the creation of identity and relationships, from which the #vanlife movement is created and maintained. The hashtag associated with the #vanlife way of life has created a community that can be thought of as a “subculture bearing headway into the growing pains of #adolescence” (Smith, 2017, para 16). #Vanlife as a movement was formed thanks to the affordances provided by Instagram and the use of hashtags. Through the frequent posting of #vanlife images with the inclusion of the hashtag, the movement emerged. Instagram's hashtag function providing the ability for members to find common ground and a place to interact, #vanlife members can co-create and maintain a sense of a subversive (sub)culture.

With members being so heavily invested and eager to share their lifestyle, their sentiments about their involvement with the #vanlife movement not only draws fellow members, but becomes appealing and contagious (Diaz, 2018) to others who may not be members of #vanlife. “Even after 400 generations in villages and cities, we haven’t forgotten. The open road still softly calls...” (Carl Sagan, 1). This quote captures the calling that many of the #vanlife members appear to have responded to. By members of the movement presenting their lifestyles and identities in a way that invites and intrigues so many others, the movement is a source of many complex and rich interactions that will provide good insight into how Instagram functions as a site of identity performance.

There are many motivations behind individual’s decisions to live life on the road. Despite the numerous motivations of van lifers, most believe that the drastic rise in popularity of #vanlife is rooted in the idealized presentation of life in a van, but also the rising cost of living, as well as 4G mobile internet being available in a more widespread nature that was previously possible (Diaz, 2018). This gives individuals the opportunity to travel for long periods of time while communicating with others from across differing locations and times. Additionally, the social commitment experienced is far less due to the uses and affordances of technology.

#Vanlife as a case study

As stated above, there is much work to still be done in understanding how existing knowledge of identities on social media can differ with each platform’s affordances, specifically when it comes to picture-based platforms. With the #vanlife movement growing in popularity, there is little to no research into the identity implications present in the picture-based social media phenomenon. In addition, there are many ways in which an assessment of the #vanlife

movement and identities associated with/created/maintained through the members could provide valuable insights into discussions of identity performance and creation in general, as well as through social media and online platforms. With the introduction of new technologies, existing conceptualizations of identity change, calling attention to the need for continual applications and insights into these new occurrences and case examples of identity. This project aims to contribute to existing conversations of social media identity presentation and performances, as well as create new, meaningful understandings of such ideas.

#Vanlife makes for an ideal case study for a number of reasons. First, the #vanlife movement is popular with both members who actively participate in this lifestyle as well as people who are not, and prevalent among the demographics who are most likely to use Instagram on a regular basis. The #vanlife movement is commonly associated with a younger population, which as stated above, is the dominant age group using Instagram. Secondly, the #vanlife movement can be defined as a community (Monroe, 2017) based on the high level of participation, and the fact that there are clear rules for membership. In order to be a part of the movement, you have to have a van, and you are expected to be active on Instagram when posting about and sharing this lifestyle in a van. Due to these rules, there is an expectation about how one is supposed to behave offline and present themselves online in relation to their experiences of living in a van.

Little is known about identity formation and maintenance within the #vanlife movement itself, as it has only recently become a social media phenomenon on the large scale that it occurs today. In the process of understanding the #vanlife movement, other aspects of identity formation and maintenance through Instagram as a platform will also be understood further. Instagram is a platform rich with interactions and possibilities for communicating with others. It

is through this platform that the #vanlife movement, a clearly defined and relatively new movement, primarily takes place. Because of this, the #vanlife movement makes an ideal case study for exploring the process of co-constructing and maintaining identities through social media platforms. Social media platforms change regularly, to the point where literature about interactions, especially identity, on social media is consistently trying to keep up with these changes (Papacharissi, 2010). Interactions are central to the process of identity formation, and the #vanlife movement places great emphasis on interacting with other #vanlife members. Individuals communicating in relation to #vanlife may have different meanings associated with the movement and its members, influencing the way it is conceptualized between and among #vanlife members.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide more insight into how identity formation occurs in an online setting, with the #vanlife movement being the case study used to further understand this topic. This study focused only on those who actively post about and share experiences of their #vanlife, considering the goal of this project being to assess the nature of online vs. offline presentations of their experiences and identities. In this thesis, I am going to begin with chapter 2, the literature review, to outline what is known about identity, identity performance through social media, and subcultures. In chapter 3, I will discuss the findings from content analysis that was conducted for Instagram images associated with the #vanlife movement. Chapter 4 of this thesis will discuss the findings from the interviews with members of the #vanlife movement. Chapter 5 will then conclude the research, what the main take aways were, convergences and divergences among the data, and how this thesis can further inform scholarly discussions about identity and identity performance.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A great deal of research has addressed identity and identity performance. To create a theoretical foundation for the work carried out in this thesis, it is necessary to connect existing literature on identity, identity performance, social media platforms, and subcultures. This chapter aims to do that and to introduce the research questions that guided the research presented in the following chapters.

Identity

When people think of identity, they typically think of who somebody is, their name, their identifying qualities or characteristics, or the behaviors they exhibit. This can mean something different for everybody, but generally identity is associated with the characteristics or mannerisms of a person. Although most think of identity as a fixed entity, something that “belongs” to an individual, it is more accurate to view identity as something that is created and constantly shaped by an individual and their surroundings. Identity can be thought of as the communication of personal characteristics that we want other people to use in their assessment of us of (Dennen & Burner, 2017). The nature of this communication can vary, whether it be verbal or nonverbal communication, but it is typically understood in the context of interacting with one’s self or others. Communication with the self, or intrapersonal communication, is a place of imagined interaction where an individual makes sense of events, ideas, and experiences in his or her own head (Brooks, 1978). Through intrapersonal communication, meaning can be made about events or interactions that have occurred which may change future behaviors (Honeycutt, 1987). This can mean that even when someone is talking to themselves and engaging in

intrapersonal communication, they are maintaining and creating their sense of identity. I will be arguing that identity is a social phenomenon, aligning with the idea of social construction where meaning is created, altered, and maintained through participation and interaction (Howard, 2000). Even this internal, intrapersonal meaning making process involves the reliance on socially informed tools, such as social norms. As humans, we express identity through messages that “produce individual identity out of social network interaction” (Hartley, 2010, p. 305). Identity is reliant upon and constructed through interactions, whether those interactions occur individually or with others.

Contextualizing identity as social is crucial, as the everyday interactions that a person participates in will influence their individual sense of self (Scott et. al., 1998). Additionally, it is through the use of social norms that one makes sense of who they are, i.e., the nonverbal and verbal cues that we learn and practice through interactions with others inform and enable those same interactions, both with others and within ourselves. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states that language shapes an individual’s sense of reality, and reality can only be experienced using tools provided by language. This theory claims that one’s experienced “real world” (p. 160) is built from the linguistic habits of one’s group (Whorf, 1951). The nature of these linguistic habits and tools continues to change over time, and is at the center of understanding identity. In order for an understanding of self to exist, one has to be able to make sense of one’s interactions, and the only way to acquire the tools to do so is through interaction. During this literature review, I will be arguing for the need to consider identity performance as a social process, that there is authentic self of self or identity outside of interactions, and how conceptualization of identity occurs through technologically contextualized interactions. The following concepts related to identity

will be discussed: meaning making, social identity theory, symbolic interactionism, the theory of normative behavior, dramaturgical theory, social comparison theory, and self-perception theory.

Meaning making during interactions can be thought of as two-fold. The first is the way an individual makes sense of the interaction itself, and the other is the way the individual interprets themselves and their own actions during that interaction (van den Berg, 2008). Interactions that occur between individuals “shapes the self and is in turn shaped by it” (Csikazentmihalyi, 1990, p. 13). This supports the idea that identity does not exist within a vacuum, but that it is necessary to consider an individual’s identity as being socially constructed. It is through the everyday interactions that an individual learns to makes sense of the inherent values within a group or society, which then influences the way their concept or self and identity is created (Marwick & boyd, 2011). The intrapersonal and interpersonal process of meaning making is paramount to understanding how one’s identity is created, performed, and maintained. The importance of considering the social aspect of identity formation and performance is reflected in the three major theories that have guided thinking about identities in the past century.

Social identity theory is one of the theories that explores how people view themselves within and outside of social interactions. Howard (2010) claims that all aspects of one’s identity are social. The tools needed to make sense of one’s identity is reliant upon the interactions that they have with others. Intrapersonal communication could not occur without the social, interpersonal interactions that occur with others. This leads to a reflexive process, where an individual will behave or act in a certain way, then make sense of that behavior or performance. The meaning making process on the individual, intrapersonal level is where one takes the interactions or communication had with others, and seeks to make sense of those interactions.

This interaction that occurs on the intrapersonal level can be thought of as self-directed thoughts and feelings (Weiner, 2000).

Meanings made intrapersonally will contribute to the ways in which an individual makes sense of their identity with others and on their own. Not only can you have conversations with people in your head, but the conversations you have with others will influence the way you think about yourself. Though there may be distinctions to make about the nature of interactions, such as public communication vs. interpersonal communication, social identity theory claims that one's understanding of their identity could not exist without their interactions with others that help to cultivate and create a sense of self.

Symbolic interactionism furthers the importance of considering the role of interactions when understanding identity, as it explores the complex process of meaning making within interactions (Mead, 1934). Symbolic interactionism claims that meaning is constructed through the use of language, interactions with others, and the interpretation of those interactions (Blumer, 1962; Strauss, 1993). When considering identity through a symbolic interactionist perspective, identity can be considered as being constituted through constant interactions with other individuals, dominantly through talking and language (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Each interaction will either reinforce existing meanings or lead to new understandings and meanings, particularly in the context of an individual's identity. The symbols used in these interactions structure how we interact, as well as what meanings are associated with these symbols. Additionally, these symbols and the meanings placed on these symbols, which is a highly social process, are used to make sense of ourselves and our own identity. This process is highly social due to an individual's reliance upon social norms to make sense of those interactions and meanings on an interpersonal and intrapersonal level. We learn how to interact because of past interactions with

others, where we gain the the tools, such as language and nonverbal communication cues, that we use to communicate with in future interactions. The words we use to communicate with others and make sense of those interactions on an intrapersonal level rely on those very interactions to obtain and maintain the necessary tools (such as language and words) for doing so.

Another theory to consider when understandings the performative nature of identity is the theory of normative behavior. The theory of normative behavior states that behaviors shape and are in turn shaped by the social structure that one experiences, as the behaviors that one engages in are informed by the social and interactional structures in our society (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), This theory argues that people compare their behaviors to others' behaviors and the interactions had with others. This usually occurs on a larger group or societal level, reflecting the need to consider the role of social influences on how one chooses to behave. It is argued that individuals will make behavioral decisions based on the perceived reactions of their audiences (Shulman & Levine, 2012), offering the idea that behaviors that an individual perceives to be the norm may alter or influence their future behaviors.

If someone behaves a certain way but learns through the interactions following that behavior that their actions were socially unacceptable, they will likely choose to behave differently in the future, as to align with the perceived social expectations. This offers the idea that behaviors will be shaped to better align with the perceived social norm. Because of this relationship between the individual and the social, an individual's identity cannot be viewed as separate from the social situations from which it was created and maintained. For example, one would not know which side of the road to drive on or how to stand in line to wait for something if they had not engaged in social interactions. One learns how to drive and how to wait in line

through perceiving and making meaning of the behaviors of others, as well as through receiving guidance from others to make these norms clearly understood. Without these perceived norms, an individual would be unclear of how to individually interact within these societal situations.

Human identity is performative, meaning that each interaction can be viewed as presenting or performing aspects of themselves to others. Individuals create identities using symbols, norms, and other social cues derived from human interaction, both interpersonally and intrapersonally. Identity performance can be defined as “the purposeful expression (or suppression) of behaviors relevant to those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity” (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007, p. 3), meaning that the ways in which an individual will present themselves will be related to the behaviors of others around them. This idea suggests that human identity is not something that we are or are born into or that remains constant forever, rather it is something that we ‘do’ everyday, through our daily interactions and performances. These performances are tied to social conventions, expectations of others, and desire to be perceived in certain ways (Goffman, 1959). During each interaction, an individual presents, maintains, and creates their identity, as well as making decisions about what others will and will not see.

Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to identity explores the concept as having a frontstage (what everyone will see) and a backstage (what a group of trusted individuals will see). The backstage is typically where an individual creates their self-concept, making sense of who they are. This process is again social as well as highly personal, as an individual will gauge what is an acceptable or desirable identity through social interactions that take place on the frontstage, but will make sense of and work through that acceptable identity on a personal level. For example, it may be expected that a student is supposed to respectfully and quietly sit in a classroom during

class time, but the ways in which that student may react or make sense of those expectations in private (i.e., being frustrated or unhappy with these expectations) may differ from the behaviors exhibited in the classroom setting.

The active process of mindfully managing and presenting one's identity with the consideration of how others will interpret it offers up the idea that an individual can have numerous appropriate or socially desirable identities for different situations. Who you are at a sporting event when cheering for your team may be different than who you are when you show up to work. Individuals engage in active self-monitoring, acknowledging the audience and presenting the ideal self through impression management (Hogan, 2010). Goffman coined the term impression management to explain how individuals alter their behaviors and presentations of identity in relation to their audiences (Goffman, 1959). Since there are different ideal selves for unique circumstances, impression management is a way to curate the aspects of identity that are presented or visible to each audience (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). The different ways we manage our impression leads to different presented selves, based on the anticipated benefits and expected audience. Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs,

Before disclosing or presenting certain aspects of one's identity, individuals consider their intended audience. Social comparison theory states that individuals engage in self-evaluation by comparing themselves with others who appear to be similar to them, such as those in similar peer groups or shared cultural values (Festinger, 1954). This social comparison can be either negative or positive, meaning whether this comparison leads to beneficial or harmful outcomes. One way to consider social comparison is through the role of self-descriptions, which occur on an intrapersonal level, which could not exist without an individual being taught through interactions had with a group or community of others (Skinner, 1953, 1957), furthering the idea

that these internalized thoughts occur in response to interactions had within a community. This idea places importance on the communicative tools provided by interactions with others in the meaning making process, particularly on the intrapersonal level. Through this self-communication, an individual is looking to make sense of who they are intrapersonally, as well as who they are in relation to others.

The nature of social comparison theory is closely related to that of social identity theory, as both theories emphasize the inherently social nature of identity performance and creation and maintenance. Social comparison theory explicitly considers the act of comparing one's self to others, whereas social identity theory more broadly considers social interactions as a whole. It has been found that if others view their peers in a positive light, the comparison can be a beneficial source of motivation to behave in a way that would align with those positive understandings of others (de Vries et. al., 2017). Conversely, if the consideration of others comes from a place of comparison with the goal of being more like that person, it can negatively affect the satisfaction of the individual sharing information online (de Vries et. al., 2017).

When considering the theory of normative behavior, it can be argued that individuals behave in a way that acknowledges the social groups they are a part of. These perceived social expectations can therefore influence the way an individual chooses to present themselves to others. The self can be portrayed in two different ways, acquisitive or protective. Acquisitive self-presentation is where individuals would seek social approval of their presented ideal self, whereas protective self-presentation is fueled by avoiding disapproval (Rui, 2013). Humans typically act acquisitively, seeking approval of others when exposing parts of their identity, but will partake in protective self-presentation if the expectation of presentation is unclear, if the disclosed information undermines positive images of identity, or if the internal characteristics

(such as low self-esteem) make it difficult to allow themselves to be seen authentically by others (Rui, 2013).

Another factor to consider is the notion that identity and sense of self is not static and can change through intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions. Our sense of self can change, even without interactions with others. Our identity may change based on how we see ourselves acting within our environment, as well as how our environment responds to us. This idea can be seen to be related to symbolic interactionism, as previously discussed, where the meaning placed on symbols can change over time through interactions had by others. This connection suggests that our sense of self also changes over time, as the meaning placed on symbols that we use to make sense of our identity change over time. In different situations, there are different audiences and expectations for how one should behave or express their identity. One theory that explores this idea is self-perception theory (Bem, 1972) which states that one's self-concept is created and maintained through constant self-observations. Different environments lead to different self-observations, placing emphasis on the social nature of one's self-concept, and with each new environment, our self-concepts and self-observations also change.

The audience of one's behaviors, or who will be perceiving to be exposed to one's behaviors, is an essential part of how a self-concept is created. It is through the perceptions and meanings made about one's self which occur socially that a self-concept or sense of identity is created. This idea reinforces the idea that identity is not something that one acts from, but rather a social phenomenon that one is constantly navigating and negotiating. The tools needed to respond to these self-observations are heavily reliant on social interactions and social environments. When an individual chooses what to share about themselves, they will do so with their audience in mind. This is part of what psychologists have called public commitment, one of

the mechanisms of how self-perception theory works, as it explains that an individual's sense of self and behaviors will only change if their behavior is carried out in public (Schlenker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994). Because of this mindful process, individuals may change the way they present themselves based on different circumstances, (Schlenker, 1980).

In the past, identity was linked to limited geographical location, where one's interactions would primarily occur in the place where one lived, limiting the transformations possible in one's identity. With the implementation of global information networking sites, the concept of identity has changed and the importance of interaction on the formation of identity has differed over time (Van Dijck, 2013). The interactions that form the foundation of personal identities have changed dramatically in the past few decades with the rise of technology. With technology providing individuals the opportunity to interact with individuals outside of their immediate community, the nature of these early considerations of identity are not as applicable to current considerations of identity. These changes have led to a call for revisiting and reconsidering understandings of identity, and how the introduction of social networking sites compare and contrast to previous considerations.

Social media, Web 2.0, and identity

Internet-based technologies in general, and social media sites in particular, have become integral in our modern, everyday life. The term *media life* has also been used as to suggest that we do not consume media, but rather we increasingly live our lives through media (Deuze, 2012). With the introduction of these new communication technologies, the boundaries between interpersonal and mass communication have become more difficult to define (Walther, Carr, Choi, DeAndrea, Kim, Tong, & Van Der Heide, 2011). Web 2.0 provides new forms of communication among

individuals and groups (Walther et. al., 2011). Technology has created new ways to communicate with others, which merge mass communication and interpersonal communication into one (Markham & Baym, 2009), which leads to a difficulty in clearly defining online/offline separations.

Creating a sense of self in an online context raises previously unconsidered intricacies when compared to offline identity performance. The phrase *networked self* refers to mediated identity performances made possible by social media which encourage personal expression and connection to others (Papacharissi, 2010). Identity is something that is actively and reflexively constructed, particularly through the use of networked media (Kreiss, 2011). By thinking about these performances as a ‘story telling of the self’, we can view technology as helping us to “make sense of who we are, who we have been, and who we can become” (Papacharissi, 2019, p. 3). The nature of construction of the self differs when occurring in face to face interactions and through social media, requiring further consideration and investigation (Kennedy, 2006). Since the emergence of social media platforms, literature related to the concept of identity has seen an increased consideration of the ways identity and identity performance take place through technological platforms. There is still much to be discussed and explored in terms of how identity performances happen through these platforms, especially as our understanding of what is social has changed. Many concepts central to identity creation and performance require rethinking if they are to apply to technology-based interactions. In the following section, I will discuss three of the most important concepts; privacy, self-presentation, and impression management.

Privacy has always been an important aspect of identity formation. Privacy is associated with the information about one’s self that is not commonly known to others (Petronio, 2011). In

this sense, it can be seen to align with one's backstage (Goffman, 1959) information, which is an important part of the identity formation and performance process. Privacy can be thought of as the ability to control what information to share about oneself (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). Goffman (1959) was one of the first scholars to explore this when he talked about the distinction between backstage and frontstage, a distinction that implied some level of control on behalf of the individual performing. When sharing aspects of oneself, it is common to consider who may be able to see the information presented. Making clear distinctions about these audiences was different before the introduction of technology into our everyday lives; in general, it was a lot easier to maintain and navigate face to face interactions than in online based interactions.

One term that accounts for the new means by which individuals communicate through social media platforms is the context collapse (boyd, 2011), which refers to the fact that in online spaces, an individual has to perform to a wide variety of audiences due to the lack of distinction or separation between backstage and frontstage. In the context of technology, specifically social media, the audience is difficult to identify, leaving users to accommodate for this disconnect and perform for an imagined audience. Only then can they proceed with ensuring their behaviors are socially appropriate or relevant (boyd, 2011), reinforcing the importance of considering the nature and process of self-presentation through social media platforms. Without these clear distinctions of who will be exposed to content posted online, individuals frequently account for the imagined audience, or individuals who they are not able to see but know might see their content (boyd, 2011). This process of imagining an audience can be said to be valuable, as the process of doing so leads to self-presentations that are intended to align with the intended norms of that group or community (boyd, 2011), but can also lead to detrimental outcomes, if the audience is imagined inaccurately or incorrectly. In addition, there are multiple frontstages on

which an individual presents themselves, both within different platforms as well as between platforms. For example, one's behavior might differ between Facebook groups or one may behave differently on their Instagram profile than they would on their LinkedIn profile, based on their audience and the accepted behaviors for each setting. Moreover, online spaces make it difficult to identify and separate audiences (boyd, 2011). It is difficult to know exactly who and when the information you are disclosing online will be consumed when communication through social media platforms. This lack of distinction and control of audiences may lead individuals to alter their self-presentation in either major or minor ways (Vitak, 2010), such as changing the brightness on their photos vs. changing the age displayed on their profile. The inability to make audience distinctions through social media platforms are influenced by the networks of connections and interactions that we participate in every day, which are central to the formation of a sense of self (Gergen, 1991; Latour, 2017).

Communication privacy management theory seeks to explain what this difficulty managing or navigating privacy would mean in a technological setting, where private information is defined as any information that leads to a feeling of vulnerability and to a desire to control that information (Petronio, 2002, 2010, 2013), and information that can be owned or used in some way that the original discloser had not intended when sharing that information (Child, 2015). Communication privacy management theory claims that there are different ways in which an individual may compensate for the lack of privacy online, the main one being strategic ambiguity, or intentionally creating or sharing vague information to maintain control of information (Child, 2015). When connecting this to Goffman's discussion of frontstage and backstage, it becomes clear that with the introduction of social media, the line between frontstage and backstage behavior, and private and public information has become more blurred. With the

many ways in which people can choose to disclose information about themselves and manage their identity presentation today, particularly through social media platforms, it is harder to effectively identify and manage the audiences of information shared online.

Self-presentation through mediated platforms allows the individual to modify their disclosures, leading to a more selective sharing of the different elements of the self (Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimmons, 2002; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Walther, 1996). Identity performance through mediated platform therefore includes a variety of new means for communication and interaction, leading to different understandings of identity. Self-presentation, or the ways one presents themselves, can take place through “public displays of connection” to others, which “serve as important identity signals that help people to navigate the networked social world, in that an extended network may serve to validate identity information presented in profiles” (Donath & boyd, 2004, p. 219). Through social media platforms, individuals may also share previously unexpressed aspects of their identity (McKenna & Bargh, 1998), or things they wouldn’t normally share, potentially even sharing never-before-seen parts of their identity (Hancock, 2007; Turkle, 1995). Since it was created, Web 2.0 has been a place for public self-presentation (Gonzalez & Hancock, 2008). It has been claimed that the process of forming an online presence is similar to offline identity construction, where careful and mindful choices are made about who will see their self-presentation (Stern, 2004). Parts of this claim may be accurate, but it is also important to acknowledge the ever-changing nature of social media platforms and the affordances they provide for their users, such as the opportunity of using filters or editing images, often leads to mindful identity performances. With social emphasis on identity, the presentations of one’s identity will be based on who will be able to see these performances (Schlenker, 1980). With the introduction of numerous new ways of

communicating through social media platforms afforded by Web 2.0, there are many new considerations to account for when seeking to understand and make sense of modern, social media identity construction and maintenance.

Self-presentation is the second concept that sets the foundation for understanding identity presentation and creation through online platforms. As mentioned before, interactions are central to the formation and maintenance of identities and it is through interactions with others that groups of individuals form (Scott et. al., 1998). Based on how people present themselves in different situations, their sense of identity will be influenced by these presentations. With these groups being formed through interaction, it is important to consider how identity performance and creation occur in online settings. Online, which is commonly what a large audience will be able to see, an individual will present themselves differently than they would if only a select few would see their identity performances. This relates back to Goffman (1959)'s work on frontstage and backstage, where the role of the audience in determining how one will choose to present themselves is central to this modern understanding of identity performance, with the audience shaping the ways one will express and negotiate their identity.

Online platforms allow individuals to present themselves in more curated ways, suggesting a third important consideration, impression management. Impression management considers the way individuals change their behaviors that are visible to others for the purpose of creating and maintaining a desired perception that others have of them (Schneider, 1981). Through this consideration, it can be assumed that one would attempt to be perceived or seen in a positive manner. The positivity bias (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014) argues that social media users are more likely to share posts or content that express positive emotions, seeking to construct a desirable networked self (Utz, 2015). Social media allow individuals to create inventories of

branded selves, serving as a commodity for consumption for the public (Hearn, 2008).

Increasingly through social networking sites, the way individuals engage in identity presentation is through images that are posted to their social media profiles. The act of understanding impression management and identity performance, therefore, requires a consideration of how the inclusion of images in these understandings leads to new considerations of such concepts.

Impression management, which is central to understandings of identity, has shifted to include the sharing and presentation of online images. Images provide individuals the ability to visually represent themselves without the use of words, leading to a different kind of interaction, due to the fact that verbal language is not involved in the communication and meaning making process. Travel content and images are the most viewed content on social media (Watson, 2015), and the digitally shared travel photos have become more about communicating an experience to others and constructing one's identity, than creating a memory of that moment for the individual (Silverman, 2015). This consideration is relevant to this thesis due to the possibility for a more curated identity through the sharing and editing of travel photos. The ability to delete and retake photographs allows for more experimentation and creates more "control over how people and places are represented" (Larsen, 2014, p. 103). With images being a form of identity performance, the ability to delete and retake instances of identity performances leads to the need for a reconsideration of the very nature of this process. Because of this affordance provided by social media sites, the act of impression management has gone from real-time management of physical behaviors, to carefully planned out posts and identity performances, therefore altering the process of impression management.

Instagram is especially interesting in this regard, as it consists mostly of images, functioning as "an archive in the process of becoming" (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015, p. 7). The

posts shared on Instagram consist of slightly edited photos or videos that are accompanied by short captions created by the user (Dupont, 2019). Through the continual posting of these images, the individual creates a visual autobiography (Fallon, 2014) that is accessible to others. Instagram allows people to provide a window into their life for others by documenting changes over time, leading individuals to actively curate these changes more consciously with the acknowledgement that others will see them.

The formation of the digital self is hyperconnected, where the digital self can be seen to have hundreds or thousands of connections at any given moment, whereas in person, an individual would only be connected to those in physical proximity to them at that moment. Individuals use social media to build on and expand their non-virtual identity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) through the affordances provided by social media. The process of becoming is now a public event that we willingly share with others. In doing so, we curate it a lot more consciously and carefully (Case, 2014), making the process of becoming a form of impression management as much as personal growth. Instagram is characterized as sharing individual's everyday lives (Manovich, 2016), where images serve as "cultural artifacts and social practice" (Senft & Baym, 2015).

Through this process of sharing images, "Instagram users construct their identities and simultaneously express their belonging to a certain community. Thus performing the self is at once a private act as well as a communal and public activity" (Tifentale & Manovich, 2015, p. 8). With their identity being easily accessible and visible to others, the process of forming an online, Instagram identity requires careful consideration and mindful navigation. These images and online activities, which can be seen to be acts of impression management, serve as a foundation for interacting and negotiating one's identity with others. In this sense, the process of

impression management can be seen as a highly social and collaborative process. Goffman (1979) created a framework for analyzing gender portrayals in the media, which was comprised of 5 dominant categories: relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, ritualization of the subordination, and licensed withdrawal. Each of these categories acknowledges the role of societal-level understandings that is needed to make sense of other individual's acts of impression management, in this case Instagram posts, that are easily accessible to a wide variety of audiences. Instagram as a social media platform, through its ability to interact on a public level, therefore allows for the formation of networked publics. The nature of these unique publics leads to an alteration in how individuals interact and communicate with each other through social media platforms.

Identity presentations on social networking sites occurs through the free sharing of personal content (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). This personal content has attracted the interest of major corporations who have been actively seeking ways to use this shared content to their financial advantage (Ross, 2013). A political economic approach to this perspective offers the idea that through the creation of this free content by the social media users, there is a possibility for this content to be harnessed and used for capital and corporate accumulation (Andrejevic, 2007). This perspective raises the need for considering not only what individuals could gain by posting content, but also how corporations profit by these individuals posting content through social media platforms.

Online, people are able to connect with each other regardless of time or distance, leading to the questioning of authenticity (boyd, 2011). With a disconnection of space and time in interactions, the content, which is central to understandings of communication online, is easier to alter, which relates to the suggestion that replication and reproduction lead to a loss of "aura"

(Benjamin, 1969, p. 220), or the authentic aesthetic characteristics of the original content or object, over time. Benjamin's discussion of 'aura' was suggested in the context of art work that loses its value and authenticity once replicated, altering that art's relationship to space and time. A similar idea can be applied to social media platforms, in that allowing individuals the ability to replicate or consciously curate the images or information they share online threatens the authenticity of these identity presentations, as social media profiles allow individuals to actively alter the ways in which they are presenting themselves (boyd, 2011) to others. In the context of Instagram, this process of curating the images shared online therefore complicates the authenticity of one's self and the content that users share.

Due to the affordances provided by technology and social media platforms, such as hashtags, filters, and the ability to share content with a wide variety of audiences, it is important to stay up to date with information and assumptions associated with these platforms, as current research does not always consider the effects of new technologies in communication dynamics (Walther et. al., 2011). This thesis will address this. A technological affordance can be thought of as the capabilities provided by technology to allow an individual with an opportunity to act in a way that that individual had intended or hoped to (Faraj & Azad, 2012). Social media platforms afford individuals to control the nature and content of sharing knowledge in a unique manner (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane & Azad, 2013). For example, individuals are able to share or portray things in a curated, transparent, hyperconnected, or private way, depending on what the user chooses to do. Each platform allows individuals to create, share, and control their content in different ways, based on the technological affordances of the platform architecture which introduce unique ways for communicating and presenting one's identity.

More specifically, these unique affordances and changes in the nature of interaction extends to a much-needed reevaluation of identity and the role of interaction in the creation of that identity. As explored above, identity is a social, performative process. When assessing identity through social media platforms, it can be understood that the nature of these social and performative processes are connected to the affordances provided by the technological platform being used. However, little is known about what this looks like in practice. #Vanlife, with its reliance and strong presence on social media, particularly Instagram, provides the ideal consideration and application of these understandings of identity and identity performance through social networking sites. This leads to the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do members of the #vanlife movement use Instagram to construct their identity as members of this movement?

RQ2: How does this construction reflect and/or elaborate on existent theoretical constructs about identity creation/performance?

RQ3: How do members of the #vanlife movement negotiate the various audiences when creating their posts as members of this movement?

Community and identity formation

Through the shared spaces provided in online spaces for interaction, virtual communities can form. “Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on... public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5). Making comparisons between social media sites and physically proximate communities can sometimes be problematic due to the vast differences in the nature of online interaction and offline interaction. This means that

online, specifically each different social media platform, there are different way of interacting with others. For example, a face to face interaction consists of a verbal or nonverbal cue that is portrayed or expressed to an intended audience, whereas an interaction on Instagram could consist of double tapping a picture to indicate a ‘like’ of that image. These distinctions between online and offline interactions can be useful for the purpose of furthering our understanding of identity, and can also lead to a further understanding of the nature of online interaction. By focusing on communities in the conversation of identity formation, it is possible to emphasize and place great importance on the role and nature of social interactions in the process of identity performance and creation.

Different groups have different norms and expectations, leading individuals to alter the way they present themselves in that group to align with the group expectations. An important concept to consider when discussing the role played by groups is a public. A public is a “collection of people who share a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest” (Livingston, 2005, p. 9). We are not all members of the same interpersonally connected groups, meaning that not all human beings are part of the same public. Individuals are members of different groups or publics, and memberships within these groups can change over time, leading to either inclusion or exclusion (Warner, 2002). Previous to the growing popularity of social media, the publics that individuals were a part of was reliant upon their geographical proximity, where they worked, where they lived. With social media affording individuals constant connection and communication with others despite geographical proximity, it is now possible to connect with and be a part of publics that go beyond the initial understandings of publics.

Social media platforms have created ways of communicating and connecting with others that complicates previous understandings of what a public is and how they form, such as the liking, sharing, commenting, and hashtag functions available on social media platforms. Since these technological affordances provide individuals the ability to communicate with each other, they become central to the ways publics can be formed and maintained, which differ from previous understandings of publics. Since the distinctions between publics become more difficult to make, the act of self-presentation through social media platforms, and how one is expected to act online, becomes complicated.

Networked publics are publics that are “restructured by networked technologies” (boyd, 2011, p. 41). Networked publics are viewed as both a “space and a collection of people” (boyd, 2011, p. 41, where the structure and affordances of networked publics sets them apart from previous conceptualizations of publics (boyd, 2011). They can create a space for individuals to interact and share ideas, as well as being made up of those interactions and people who participate in them. Through these technologies, an “imagined collective of individuals emerge as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice”, allowing people to “gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes” (boyd, 2011, p. 39). From these intersections arises a community, specifically one that is mediated through the use of social media platforms.

Social networking sites carry certain measurable expectations of an individuals’ sociability and the creation of meaningful connections with others (Parks, 2011). People on different sites attach different meanings to how many friends one has or how many likes one gets on a post. For each platform, the measure of how socially connected one is, is assessed or presented in different ways. On Facebook or LinkedIn, the number of friends or connections is a source of importance, whereas on Instagram, the amount of likes or comments one gets on a post

is viewed as being one of the most valuable measures of success or character. The popularity of online communities which form from and rely on these measurable expectations can be seen as a “response to the hunger for community that followed the disintegration of traditional communities” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 62). With the nature of offline and online interactions being influenced by social networking sites, understandings of community can mean both in person, physically proximate communities, as well as an online, socially mediated community. The term community evokes feelings of friendliness, trust, and belonging (Bauman, 2001), leading it to be influential to the discussion and consideration of connection and interaction. This sense of friendliness, trust, and belonging are formed through the sociability expectations present on the social media site being assessed.

Gusfield (1975) argued that there are two ways to use the term community. The first use refers to the geographical understanding of community, and the second use being the relational, connective understanding of community, which does not rely on one’s location. Each use suggests the idea that the feelings of inclusion or sense of community can vary between strong sense of inclusion and minimal sense of inclusion. These distinctions are commonly made in literature about community, with one such distinction being between strong and weak community requirements, where strong conceptualizations of communities usually refer to groups of people exist in the same physical space and who “are relatively self-sufficient within that space” (Parks, 2011, p. 107).

The conversation over time has suggested a shift away from physical proximity, and more towards the focus on the psychological level of closeness, or in terms of sociality (Amit, 2002). This new conceptualization of community aligns closer with what would be previously considered a weak sense of community, where “it is viewed as a culture, a set of ideas and

interpersonal sentiments, rather than a physical space” (Parks, 2011, p. 107). This assumption and understanding of what makes a strong or weak community has become outdated and difficult to apply to modern ways of communicating and forming communities due to the nature of interactions changing over time. Previously, the only way to interact with others was to be in the same physical location as them. With the introduction of technology and social media, individuals can communicate with anyone at any time, despite their time or location (Daweser, 2013). Instead, virtual communities are therefore defined as social groups that experience psychological and cultural qualities of a ‘strong’ community, while lacking the physical proximity (Willson, 2006).

Using recurring themes in literature on community, boyd (2011) identified criteria to evaluate and identify online groups, as well as the extent to which they function as a virtual community. One essential characteristic of authenticity in a community is the ability to engage in collective action (Jones, 1995). It is through ritualized sharing of information (Parks, 2011), such as a socially perceived standard of the frequency of posting or interacting with others, that communities are created, and in order to be sustained, this information sharing ritual must occur regularly. Through this information sharing, patterns of interaction lead to the formation of a community (Bell & Newby, 1974). Communities are also characterized by members having attachments to each other, as well as to the community as a whole (Kantor, 1972; Wilson, 2006). These connections or bonds with other members do not need to be experienced by every community member, but a majority of the members are expected to have some personal attachment to others (boyd, 2011). Group members therefore work together to make meaning of an identity, whether it be one’s own identity or someone else’s identity. In this sense,

understanding and identifying communities is important when seeking to understand the nature of identity.

Social media provides users with certain social affordances, or “possibilities for action that are called forth by social technology or environment (boyd, 2011, p. 109). Three types of social affordances, or capabilities provided by a social media platform, that are required for the creation of virtual communities on social networking sites are “affordances of membership, expression, and connection” (boyd, 2011, p. 109). The extent to which these affordances are present alters a group or community’s ability to form and sustain. Identities within communities are formed and maintained as a collective, collaborative process, through continual interactions with others in the community. This aligns closely with the highly social nature of identity formation and maintenance. When initially considering how to define or name #vanlife, the term movement is associated with this lifestyle in many of the initial associations, articles, and information in relation to #vanlife. Through these social considerations of identity, the fourth research question emerges:

RQ4: How do people active within the #vanlife movement define this movement? To what extent do their understandings of the movement reflect the principles of the networked (counter)publics proposed by boyd et. al.?

Subcultures

One form of communities is a subculture. With the introduction of technologies, the Internet, understandings and conversations about subcultures have changed. In order to understand where we are now in relation to conceptualizing subculture, we must first consider where we have come from. Hebdidge, a foundational voice in discussions of subcultures, defines

a subculture as being a resistant response to mainstream culture (1979), where members take or choose items from the mainstream culture and give those items oppositional meanings for that particular subculture. This perspective positions commodities as the central form of communication between and among subcultures (Hebdidge, 1979). This is crucial to consider in modern understandings of subcultures, as these commodities could now be considered to be content posted on social networking sites.

Some of the first conceptualizations of the term subculture were centered around and born from a rebellious, going-against-the-grain mentality, viewing subcultures as taking shape around or responding to concerns and issues (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1975). Numerous definitions arose from rebellious perspectives of subcultures. In many cases, the key feature of a counter culture or subculture, both terms relating to the departure from the mainstream culture, is the fact that it is contrary (Yinger, 1982) to something or someone. Muggleton (2000) suggested studying the individuals themselves within the subcultures in an attempt to understand those who make up the subcultures, rather than viewing them as a group of unidentifiable individuals. This viewpoint differs from other conceptualizations of subcultures, where subcultures are viewed in terms of group patterns, rather than the role of the individual.

Another response suggested viewing subcultures as neo-tribes ('neo' being used to refer to the new way of considering subcultures), seeking to understand them in terms of semi-stable communities that are fluid in nature, rather than viewing them for the inclusionary/exclusionary principles (Bennett, 1999). In attempt to understand subcultures in a holistic, big picture way, Fine & Kleinman (1979) suggest viewing the characteristics, behaviors, ideas etc. of a subculture on a scale of physical and visible components (artifacts and behaviors) or more conceptual or intellectual aspects (values and norms). Through this lens, the behaviors and presentations of self

that an individual portrays can be made sense of in terms of their individual behaviors, as well as how those behaviors fit into the group values or norms of that culture or subculture.

As mentioned above, subcultures are essentially a group of people who are somehow non-normative, or marginal in the way they live their lives, what they do, and how they do it (Gelder, 1977). These everyday practices, or ways of life, become norms within that group, shared only by those who have a similar way of living or doing things (Cohen, 1955). The role of norms, shared values, ideologies, and interests are central to what makes up a subculture and a sense of cohesion (Anderson, 1998). The norms and behaviors shared or experienced within a subculture influence the way people within subcultures interact, as well as providing the tools and opportunities to have those interactions (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). Subcultures are typically considered to be present and existing if there is a shared understanding about non-normative behaviors and artifacts that are used or experienced throughout the group (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). Each of these perspectives places importance on the role of the individual and the individual's everyday expressions of identity or membership within a subculture, This discussion aligns understandings of subcultures with symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism, as mentioned above, is the idea that meaning is created in a collaborate and collective fashion, with meanings arising through interactions between and among people (Mead, 1934). Symbolic interactionists (Becker et. al., 1961), when seeking to understand subcultures, focus on shared understandings and behaviors of groups. This theory places high importance on the perspective of a subculture participant or member, as each individual's perspective is unique (William & Copes, 2005). Through the communication of these unique perspectives with others, meanings can be made by that individual, as well as those who the individual is interacting with. Placing interactions at the center of the meaning making

process means that the everyday communication and interactions are what creates and maintains subcultures and subcultural cohesion, through the continual, collaborative meaning making process.

The artifacts and behaviors that are commonly seen as an important indicator of subcultures come to have meaning to that subculture through the interactions and collaborative creation and understanding of those artifacts and behaviors. As such, artifacts can be seen to function at the heart of subcultural interactions (Hebdidge, 1979). Through this process of interacting via artifacts and symbols, such as wearing certain clothes or using certain products, it can be said that subcultures are created through the collective manipulation of symbols to form symbolic value (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). Through a subculture's communication through these commodities, the meanings attached to those commodities can be altered to purposefully overthrow the existing meaning placed on them (Hebdidge, 1979). In this sense, culture is not only viewed as a guide for socialization among individuals, but also as a choice made by a group of individuals to behave in a way that is motivated with aligning to that subculture's behaviors (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). Change within these fluid systems of meaning making is inevitable, as the interactions between subculture members will change the content, discussions, and dialogue each time participation occurs (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). These ideas call for the mindful consideration of how these alterations of meaning associated with artifacts and commodities can be harnessed or exploited by corporations, specifically for the purpose of commercialization and capitalization (Hebdidge, 1979). In this sense, behaviors that may have begun as deviant behaviors may become dominant behaviors through the process of commercialization and commoditization.

It is important to understand definitions and considerations of subcultures, as well as how one goes about identifying as a member of a subculture. The symbolic interactionist perspective, as mentioned above, would claim that the act of identifying with a subculture and engaging in identity formation within a group should be viewed as an active process, not passive (Young & Craig, 1997). If an individual maintains a shared sense of meaning with other members of that subculture, it can be said that they can therefore identify as a member. The understanding of meanings, traditions, and rules within subcultures, which are typically non-normative in comparison to dominant society, is said to create a strong sense of identity that is not shared by the larger population (Young & Craig, 1997), justifying the term subculture when describing one's identity. Individuals may see themselves as identifying with a subculture by actively interacting with the subculture itself, as well as the symbols and meanings shared within that subculture (Fine, 1983). This perspective stresses the importance of interactions within a subculture as being central to the inclusion and identification with a subculture. Through interactions, an individual's sense of belonging and identity are formed.

Castells (2011) focuses on defining a subcultural identity as one that is formed as an oppositional process. He defines subcultures as being related to a sense of cultural commune, providing individuals with a place of escape from an elite identity through the use of code, symbols, and means of communicating. The meaning making process is where these oppositional identities are created, as "the search for meaning takes place in the reconstruction of defensive identities around communal practices. Most of social action becomes organized in the opposition between unidentified flows and secluded identities" (Castells, 2011, p. 11). Our understanding of self is always to be viewed as a "construction, no matter how much it feels like a discovery" (Calhoun, 1994, p. 9-10), where this discovery is constructed from a place of difference from

others, placing interactions with others at the heart of forming subcultural identities. This perspective aligns closely with symbolic interactionism and social identity theory, where interactions are seen to be central to the identity formation and presentation process.

This active process can also be referred to as a continual process in the way that the subculture itself, as well as those who make up that subculture, can be seen as both informing and being informed by others (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). This identification process can only occur if the individual is able to interact with other members or individuals who identify with that subculture in order to maintain and create this mutually informed (Fine & Kleinman, 1979), active nature of meaning making. If the identification with other members of the subculture is considered successful, then an individual would experience a sense of similarity to other members of the subculture through shared narratives, meanings, and feelings of connection (Williams, 2006).

In the context of subcultures, social media and social networking sites serve as an important gathering location for communicating norms and shared beliefs, in turn creating and maintaining their subcultural identities. This is based on the assumption that individuals seeking to create or maintain subcultural identification go to the internet to obtain social interaction rather than withdraw from it (Rheingold, 2000). This perspective provides insight into the nature of interactions that occur within members and users of social media sites. If one is seeking interaction, they are going to behave in a sociable manner, rather than signing into a social media platform to be isolated from others. Because of this potential for meaningful interactions and communication among subculture members, social media can be viewed as a social space where individuals can construct both personal and social identities (Williams, 2006), which can be seen as highly interconnected with each other. Social media can also be seen as providing an

opportunity for those seeking out like-minded individuals (McArthur, 2009) who would be part of a physically experienced subculture if they were able to. The internet provides these individuals the opportunity to overcome the constraint of location and time (Maratea & Kavanaugh, 2012), and find members of that created subculture that aligns with their beliefs and values (McArthur, 2009).

With the introduction of social media, understandings of these concepts and ideas surrounding not only subcultural identification, but the conceptualization of subcultures as whole. Social media plays a role in facilitating and diffusing subcultural values, contributing to a sense of cohesion and group membership (Williams & Copes, 2005), through social media platforms where individuals communicate via posting content, messaging, texting, commenting, blog forums, etc. In the context of skater subculture, the skaters used Instagram to present content that “doesn’t matter” (Dupont, 2019, p. 10) to dominant cultures, but still aligns with the norms of that subculture. Instagram as a platform allows for the presentation of backstage-esque behavior in a way that can still be seen by many. Both the technological and social affordances that social media provides leads to the complication of subcultural theories and assumptions made on the understanding of these groups as only occurring through face to face interactions. The role of social media in an individual and a subculture can vary, as some subcultural members go online to supplement their existing offline lifestyle, while others substitute offline face to face interactions all together (Williams, 2006), and rely on the internet as the sole interaction place for that particular subculture. In the case of substitution, this online space is where subcultural identities are created and where shared senses of meaning are negotiated (Williams, 2006). In the case of the #vanlife movement and the frequent travel associated with it,

Instagram provides members the opportunity to easily showcase their experiences and identities, despite the inability to regularly communicate face to face with other members of #vanlife.

Within the context of subcultural identities, the internet can be seen as a place where individuals can present themselves in a way that may be more or less aligned with how they perform offline (Marwick, 2016), leading to a potential disconnect between online identities and offline identities. The hypoconnectivity of social media may allow for individuals to portray themselves in a way that suggests a sense of strong identification with a subcultural group that they may not be able to obtain or maintain offline to the same extent. Through presentations of one's identity, relationships, and insights, a sense of group cohesion can be created and fostered, with the ability to be exposed to, reference, and interact with other individuals with a similar subcultural identity (Williams & Copes, 2005). An interesting tension arises from the assumption that those who are exposed to subcultural information online are seeking subcultural affiliation. Although the internet facilitates subcultural values in numerous ways, it does not simultaneously require individuals to self-identify as subcultural members (Williams & Copes, 2005). The posts or interactions online are considered subcultural artifacts, similar to those discussed in early conceptualizations of subcultures (Williams & Copes, 2005). Since the nature of interactions online has changed drastically from foundational concept of face to face interactions, the very nature of subcultural identification has also become complicated.

Identification to and with a group, however, can typically be seen as the motivation for socialization and interaction within a subculture (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). With the ease of formulating identification with a group through social media platforms, it must be considered that some individuals may even falsify their true motivations or identities for the purpose of obtaining this group cohesion through social media. The opportunities provided by the internet to

circulate ideas, images, ideas, and beliefs are what ground, reinforce, and maintain many subcultures (Stahl, 2004). This concept aligns closely with the fluid nature of identities, subcultures, and the dialogic nature between and within them (Fine & Kleinman, 1979). With each new affordance the internet provides, there will be more complex applications and considerations in terms of subcultural identities. Subcultural identity creation is unique due to the nature of the meaning making process of artifacts and symbols used within subcultures, leading to the final research question:

RQ5: (a) What behaviors define the #vanlife movement? (b) Do members see themselves as being part of a subculture?

CHAPTER 3

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Methods

#Vanlife has become known to the world through the rising number of posts associated with the hashtag on Instagram. In fact, as will be discussed below, the #vanlife movement hinges entirely on its online existence. In order to understand how identity performance occurs online, I conducted interviews with people who self-identify as members of the #vanlife movement and conducted a content analysis of #vanlife posts (images and captions alike) on Instagram. In this chapter, I will present the findings from my content analysis.

Data

The analysis was carried out using publicly available Instagram posts that used the hashtag #Vanlife, and which were posted between 8/1/2018 and 12/31/2018. A total of 500 posts were collected. Videos were not analyzed for the purpose of this thesis for numerous reasons. Videos provide a different means of presenting one's experiences than still pictures, requiring an additional consideration of the nature of identity performance that was beyond the scope of this project. By analyzing only images, consistency in methods and data collection could be maintained. In addition, #vanlife began with images only, making it more appropriate to analyze only images associated with the #vanlife movement. For posts to make it into the collection, they had to have a minimum of 750 likes. This number was chosen because an initial scan of Instagram posts that use the #vanlife hashtag revealed that the users who frequently post in relation to the #vanlife generally received anywhere between 750-11,000 likes on their posts. The number of likes a post receives is an indication of the extent to which that post resonates

with people who align themselves with the #vanlife movement: The more likes, the more popular a post, the better it can be seen to reflect what people think the movement entails. Therefore, to ensure that the posts that were examined for this study reflected the #vanlife identity, using a minimum number of likes was seen as a valid way to ensure the study only considered those posts that are seen as central to the movement.

To obtain these images used in the analysis, I logged out of Instagram guaranteeing that the content obtained was public, and entered #vanlife into the search bar on Instagram. Posts that came up that met the minimum 750 'likes' requirements and which included the hashtag "#vanlife" in their posts were captured. A total of 500 images were collected. When making decisions about sample size, the adequacy of the data was not determined by the quantity of the sample, but rather by the appropriateness of the data (O'Reilly & Parker, 2002). The goal of this project is to describe the phenomenon under study (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002), and use this specific case study to further elaborate on online identity performance. Therefore, collecting images that were popular in the #vanlife movement was deemed a valid approach. The idea was to continue data collection if after analyzing the first 500 images, theoretical saturation had not been reached.

Grounded theory claims that saturation is achieved when categories are fully accounted for, the variability can be explained, and the relationships can be tested and validated, meaning a theory can emerge (Green & Thorogood, 2004). This aligns with the goal of grounded theory which is to develop a theory meant to explain a social process that is studied within the environments that they take place in (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Disconfirming cases further exemplified the themes and patterns found within the analysis. In the case of this analysis, once 300 of the 500 images were coded and analyzed, saturation was

reached, i.e., relationships and variabilities between images could be explained and analyzed, and as a result, no further data was collected or analyzed.

Analysis

The purpose of the content analysis was to find out how people participate in the movement and how the #vanlife identity is presented through Instagram posts. The main focus of this analysis was the images posted by the #vanlife member; however if needed, the text associated with the post (the poster's comment as well as others' comments and likes) were referred to if they provided added meaning and understanding about the image itself.

The analysis was informed by the principles of grounded theory, which were used to identify and explore emergent themes. Grounded theory, a highly flexible and open research process, was used because “rather than aiming to theorize about ‘society’ as a whole, it seeks to understand one particular aspect of it” (Beauving, 2015, p. 5). Grounded theory as a methodology is said to be a blend of interactionism and positivism and attempts to create a theory or theories from an analysis of patterns, themes, and common categories found in data (Babbie, 2016). Using grounded theory allows the researcher to think comparatively, view data from multiple perspectives, double-check interpretations of the data, and allow the research questions and data to guide the interpretation and analysis process (Babbie, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory aligns closely with the social constructivist perspective, placing the role of each individual at the center of understandings about concepts or phenomena under analysis, seeing them as “knowledgeable agents” (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012, p. 17). This methodology also aligns with the symbolic interactionist perspective as it aims to understand

“the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live in it” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). As such, grounded theory matched my research goals very well.

The principles from grounded theory were, for the purposes of this particular analysis, augmented by a question posed by Messaris (1994): “What previous knowledge or experience must viewers have in order to make an appropriate response?” (p. 7). This quote exemplifies the importance of considering symbolic interactionism and a social understanding of one’s identity. The means through which individuals make sense of the images, in this case on Instagram, as well as making decisions about what to post themselves, is a highly social process. During the analysis, I thus considered what role do socially agreed upon norms and beliefs have in both the creation and interpretation of these images. Including this perspective in this analysis allowed me to consider the various social norms that guided the creation and interpretation of these images providing insight into the meanings associated with the movement. The #vanlife movement is relatively new, meaning the members themselves have a less restricted process of sense making surrounding the #vanlife identity. Furthermore, with little known about the #vanlife identity, the use of grounded theory allows for the construction of new understandings based on the meaning created in the movement.

Analysis of images differs from analyzing text, due to the level of interpretation that is required for making sense of images rather than being able to read or understand the meaning laid out through words. The analysis process for this thesis began with the identification of sensitizing concepts which emerged from initial reviews of existing literature. Charmaz (2003) states that “sensitizing concepts offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience... they provide starting points for building analysis, not ending points for evading it. We may use sensitizing concepts only as points of departure from which to study the data” (p.

259). Coding the data while considering literature on identity, identity performance, symbolic interactionism, and subcultures helped to guide the initial coding process, while still allowing the data to speak for itself. Some sensitizing concepts that emerged from the initial literature review were ideas of identity as a performance, the consideration of audiences when presenting one's identity, characteristics of subcultures, and the role of technology in altering/shaping those understandings. The emergent codes/themes that arose from the analysis either supported or did not support extant work in these areas throughout the remaining analysis process (Padgett, 2004).

Grounded theory entails the use of the constant comparison method during the data analysis process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), allowing themes and codes to be consistently revisited and, if need be, revised. Data analysis in this project was therefore characterized by iterative coding: codes were frequently revisited and reassessed to ensure that their meaning was consistent across the analysis (Weber, 1990). Iterative coding also helped to maintain clarity and confidence in patterns being found within the data, strengthening the findings and conclusions.

Following the initial coding and analysis process, numerous themes emerged from the data. These themes were grouped into two overarching themes: Impression management and #vanlife as a subculture. The subthemes included the following: The blending of the boundaries between an urban and a natural; the human body as a tool; the tidiness of the #vanlife movement, and the vans within #vanlife as home away from home.

Impression management

As previously mentioned, an individual's identity is comprised of continual presentations and performances of one's self. Because of this, considering identity as a presentation emphasizes the attempt to make sense of one's frontstage presentations of self, meaning it is through the clearly

presented aspects of one's identity that are to be made sense of by a wide audience. With the rise of social media, the process of creating and making sense of these presentations has changed, where sharing and posting images online has become a new, modern form of self-presentation (Hunt, Lin, & Atkin, 2014). The #vanlife movement is just one of the many examples where people use a hashtag to help construct their online self-presentation. The analysis of images associated with the #vanlife movement found numerous themes, including the human body as a tool, which was further divided into a sense of lax and leisure and visual appeal, and tidiness/cleanliness. These themes will be elaborated on below.

Human body as a tool

#Vanlife images on Instagram often portray the human body in a desirable manner. In most images that feature people, these people were positioned and framed in a way that appeared to be staged, similar to the presentation of the other objects inside the van. Just as images were sure to show the vans as tidy and looking like a desirable living space (as will be discussed in more detail below), the individuals presented in these spaces were also shown in a socially acceptable or socially desirable manner. Not only were the people in the images portrayed in a laid-back, comfortable way, conveying leisure and relaxation, they were also shown at their greatest advantage, with white and straight teeth, clean and tanned skin, and wearing clean clothes.

When conducting the analysis, several theoretical notions shaped the understanding of how humans were presented in ways that aligned with aesthetic norms in the images associated with the #vanlife movement. Messaris's (1994) recognition of social understandings, as previously mentioned, was an essential element in the analysis. His recognition of the necessary social understanding in the process of analyzing images (Messaris, 1994) helped to consider that

each individual's identity performance had social implications. In addition, Holbrook (1987) and Pollay (1986, 1987)'s consideration of the mirror versus the mold argument or gender presentations supplement this consideration. The mirror argument claims that advertising and dominant portrayals of gender reflect existing cultural understandings (Holbrook, 1987), while the mold argument of gender presentations and stereotypes claims that the structure and mold of advertisement shapes the values of the target audience of such media or presentations (Pollay, 1986, 1987). By using this concept as a tool, it was possible to analyze each image in relation to the social stereotypes that may influence the content being shared with the hashtag #vanlife. As previously mentioned, Goffman (1979)'s framework for analyzing gender portrayals in the media (relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, ritualization of the subordination, and licensed withdrawal) informed the sensitizing concepts used during the analysis. Furthermore, Goffman (1976) found that women and men were presented in 'hyper ritualizations' of social scenes, (p. 71), claiming that "commercial advertisements distilled everyday social rituals into scenes" (Bell & Milic, 2002, p. 220). As part of the analysis carried out for this chapter, I thus also looked for the extent to which the images posted on Instagram presented ritualized understandings of social reality,

There is a vast array of scholarship surrounding the objectification of humans, commonly women, within images and advertisements (Zotos & Tsihla, 2014). This scholarship considers why and how that individual is being presented in that way and found that typically these presentations are desirable and appealing to viewers due to the sense of happiness and positivity suggested in each image. This is reflected in the images analyzed for this case study, where #vanlife members were almost always portrayed as happy. Although social media fosters a sense of agency and independence, there are still social expectations and norms that will shape how

individuals seek to present themselves and be understood by others. People's online agency, associated with the act of posting content online, in this case images, is in effect limited by their understanding that others will interpret this content, as this may influence how individuals choose to present themselves. Even when defying aesthetic expectations or norms, it is visible to the audience that this process is occurring (Tannen, 1994). In this sense, the human body is used as a tool to align with aesthetic norms and societal beauty standards.

In the analysis of the #vanlife movement, one of Goffman's themes, licensed withdrawal, proved to be prevalent among many of the images. Licensed withdrawal is used to describe a situation wherein a woman looks away from the camera or the individual behind the camera. In his work, Goffman found that women were presented as being withdrawn from the scene around them because they were being cared for or supervised by a male or other more powerful person (Bell & Milic, 2002). In the #vanlife movement, this was observed in the many images where women looked away from the camera, whether it be looking out at nature, another location within their van, or straight ahead while driving.

The dominant norms about what is visually appealing, such as clean clothes and hair, bright, straight smiles, tan skin, and visually desirable bodies, aligning with culturally bound norms about what a desirable human body looks like, were also observed in the presentation of the #vanlife experience. This is an interesting find since one would expect that in their daily existence, #vanlife members may not always look as visually appealing as it is when a picture is taken and posted to Instagram. For example, it would be expected that after a week of not having running water or power, an individual would not appear to have clean clothes, hair, or skin, or have a clutter-free van. However, this is how the #vanlife experience is presented on Instagram.

Two dominant patterns within this use of the human body as a tool in the data was found: Lax and leisure, and visual appeal.

Lax and leisure. In most images that featured a person in the #vanlife movement, the human body associated with a #vanlife post was portrayed in a relaxed and laid-back way. A trend that emerged from the data was members posting an image of themselves laying or sitting in their bed, which was commonly positioned up against the rear doors of the van, while the back doors were open. Due to the minimal space, a common layout involved the bed pushed up against the rear doors of the van. This allows for maximizing the space within the middle of the van between the back section and the seats at the front of the van, also allowing for pictures to feature a lounge area framed by whatever view could be seen through the backdoor.

It was common to see images as identifying with one of two categories: Images where the individual's entire body can be seen, suggesting that somebody else had taken the photo, and images where only the individual's legs were seen, as to suggest that the individual themselves had taken the photo. Often, the images were taken by the individual sitting on the bed or couch, and their legs would be the only body part visible in the picture. For example, numerous images from the data involved one or two people sitting or lying on the bed inside their van with the back doors open. Their legs would take up about 2/3 of the central space of the image, while still incorporating the view or surrounding environment. The individual's legs were thus used to frame the view, as to suggest this relaxing nature of the #vanlife experience, where #vanlife members can lie in bed while be immersed in nature or their surrounding environment. Their legs then became the only sign of human interference in a picture that otherwise featured the inside of the van as well as a clear view of the nature outside. The legs can be seen as a tool to suggest relaxation: the owner of the legs is clearly lying down but can still see the outdoors; the view of

the van makes it clear that these people did not have to rely on their legs to get into nature, but that their choice of the #vanlife lifestyle allowed them to relax in the comfort of 21st century convenience while taking in the outdoors.

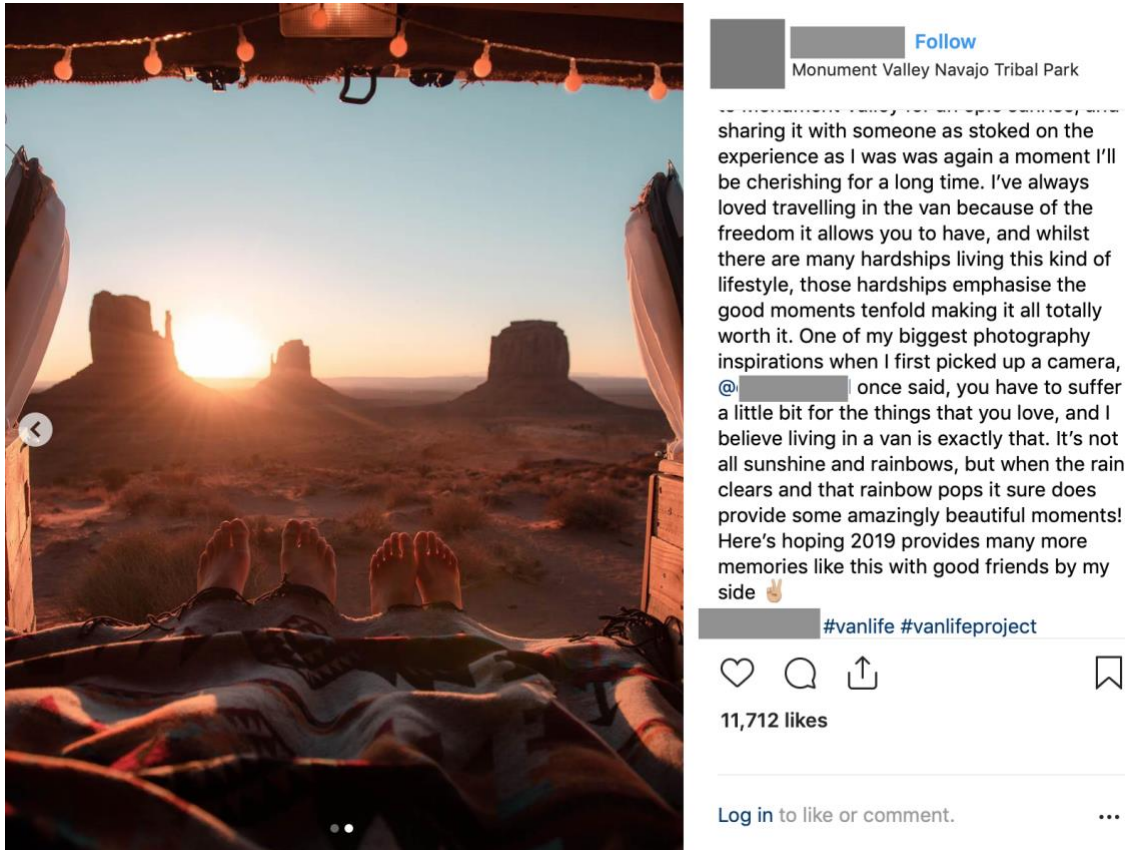


Figure 1: VL247

In one particular example (VL247)^{1,2}, the shot has been taken so that the #vanlife members' bodies can be seen, suggesting leisure and relaxation within their van and nature at the

¹ Opt-out consent from the owner of this image was sought through a message sent via Instagram: "Hello, my name is Jessica Bergstrom, and I am a master's student at the University of Maine Orono. I am conducting a research project about the #vanlife movement, particularly the #vanlife identity. I will be including your publicly available image, which I have attached below, as it will appear in my paper. You will notice that all identifying text has been covered and blocked, as to protect your privacy. When obtaining this image, I had signed out of Instagram to ensure that all images obtained, including the one attached below, were publicly available. If you have any objection to the inclusion of this image in my final project, please let me know. Thank you for your time and consideration."

² Images are numbered, their database is available upon request.

same time. In this image, the #vanlife members are shown as lying down in the comfort of their bed in their van, with a view of one of the national parks visible through the open back door, showing them, or rather, their bodies, immersed in nature. The light in the picture appears to come from the sun setting outside as well as a light in the ceiling of the van - a blending of nature and urban that I will discuss below. This image is especially interesting because it not only captures the leisure often captured by images associated with the #vanlife movement, but also does so without showing all of the effort and labor that went into making this image possible, such as what the rest of the van looks like (both interior and exterior), what the terrain that they are parking on looks like, the temperature outside, how long it took them to drive there, etc. The lifestyle associated with #vanlife is thus presented as one of relaxation and leisure, despite the behind the scenes work it took to get there and present themselves in such a way, as exemplified in the caption of the image included above.

As mentioned earlier, what is interesting about the images that fell into this category is that the hard work that goes into being a full time #vanlife member as well as the inconveniences associated with moving around and living in a small place goes unseen and ignored. This disconnect between experienced reality vs. presented reality reinforces the performative nature of identity, as each #vanlife image posted on Instagram is crafted and captured in a way that suggests a more desirable and appealing lifestyle than what one might expect. It thus touches on the notion of the frontstage-backstage dichotomy, where #vanlife members, in their attempts to create an authentic, backstage-esque performance, one featuring bare legs, beds, and relaxation, actually reinforces the frontstage, choreographed nature of their work.

Visually appealing. A second sub-theme uncovered in the analysis was the good looks of everyone visible in the images. People were presented in beautiful and polished ways that reflect

today's beauty standards. These beauty standards that pervade societal expectations are that of whiteness, such as straight hair, lighter skin, and a thin nose and lips (Taylor, 1999). Although many vans did not include or show evidence of showers, and the #vanlife movement implies a life on the road, away from modern conveniences, most #vanlife members were presented as being clean and well-bathed. The individuals appear to have clean hair, clean skin, and clean clothes. Frequently, women are shown wearing their hair down and appearing to be well-maintained, and men appeared to be well-groomed and clean, suggesting a disconnect between reality of living without consistent running water and electricity in comparison to the suggested #vanlife reality. As mentioned above, Messaris' (1994) recognition of social understandings was foundational when making sense of presented experiences within the #vanlife movement; in this case, beauty is associated with clean, soft looking hair, clean skin, white teeth, clothes free from dirt or mud. The #vanlife movement is presented as being all about simplification and newly found happiness and freedom while not conforming to social standards, yet those same social standards seem to play an essential role in deciding what and how to post on Instagram about their experiences.

The #vanlife lifestyle is commonly portrayed as centered around adventures within nature; however the ways in which human bodies were presented in the images suggested that in spite of all of these outdoor activities, people were able to maintain an immaculate appearance. This reinforces that online identity is about impression management, where presenting frontstage behavior is more accepted and common than showing backstage behavior. Connecting to the merging of portrayals of rural and urban lifestyles and environments, which will be addressed below, #vanlife members present themselves as being immersed in nature and natural landscapes

while still presenting themselves as clean and good-looking. The norms and trends seen across many #vanlife images suggest that these norms were born of larger, societal level norms.

Another common trend found among the #vanlife Instagram posts was the showing of bare skin and long, flowing hair. In many images, #vanlife members would show off their bare skin, including the arms, legs, and occasionally the stomach area. Many women wore their hair down for images, appealing to the beauty ideals of females with long flowing hair (Patton, 2006), as well as suggesting a life of leisure and lack of care. This decision to present oneself in such a way reinforces the tension between living an active and nature immersed lifestyle, as well as underlining the importance these #vanlife members attach to meeting social expectations of beauty.



Figure 2: VL34

Image VL34³ from the data exemplifies much of what has been discussed so far in relation to the expectations of human bodies in the #vanlife movement. In this picture, a woman is seen sitting at her desk in front of a vista of a canyon. Her hair is down, her arms and legs are bare, and she is smiling at her laptop screen. Aside from reflecting all of the themes discussed above, this image also shows how Goffman's (1979) licensed withdrawal is utilized in the #vanlife movement, as the woman is looking away from the camera smiling. Her posture and position in the van reflects the merging of boundaries between the indoor space of her van and the exterior, natural setting, her skin and hair appear to be clean and well maintained, meeting today's beauty standards on the exterior, natural setting, her skin and hair appear to be clean and well maintained, and she is suggesting a sense of ease and relaxation by sitting down and using her computer. The only visual evidence of her actually living in a van is the net of tangerines visible in the corner of the image, suggesting a highly stylized presentation.

Tidiness/Cleanliness

The second theme in this category centered on the portrayal of the living spaces of #vanlife member as clean, tidy, orderly, and spacious. When images included individuals' kitchens or living spaces, these rarely included signs of disarray such as dirty dishes, messy blankets, or dirty floors. Instead pictures that showed the inside of the van showed it to be neat and clutter-free. The portrayal of minimal clutter and minimal mess created a sense of the #vanlife movement as a simple and orderly lifestyle.

These presentations appear to run counter to the reality of everyday living in a small space, as I will elaborate on in the next chapter. Living in a small space most likely means that

³ Opt-out consent from the owner of this image was sought through a message sent via Instagram, the same message as listed above.

#vanlife member's living spaces become cluttered and messy. It is more likely that before creating an Instagram post, a #vanlife member cleans up their van so they can present their life in a more appealing manner. As the interviews with #vanlife members in the next chapter will reveal, living in a van is not always as simple or neat as these images imply. This is underlined by the finding that only a small number of images in the data set portrayed a messy, untidy living space, and that these images were accompanied by captions that explained the #vanlifer's decision to post this particular image. In doing so, the #vanlife members acknowledged that posting content that showed the van in a messy condition was not normal and warranted an explanation. For example, if an individual chose to share their kitchen which was covered in dirty dishes and untidiness, the captions would acknowledge the mess and explain why they chose to post the image.

In addition to the tidiness of the living spaces, the van was also presented as being very bright and well lit. Many images conveyed a bright and airy feel, either through the large windows along the side of the van, the back doors being opening allowing for light to flow into the rest of the living space, or lights running along numerous surfaces within the van. This made the van seem large and bright, again underlining the notion of #vanlife as organized, minimalist, and orderly. With maximum lighting, it becomes impossible to hide mess and clutter, suggesting a sense of transparency about the actual cleanliness and tidiness of the van.

The images that fell into this category reveal the dichotomy of being transparent with one's viewers or followers, while at the same time only presenting certain polished experiences or aspects of their everyday life. This divergence between a performative, polished and orderly lifestyle and the everyday experiences of individuals is also seen in the discussion of the interviews presented in Chapter 5, where these messy and less carefully constructed

representations are acknowledged as being the reality experienced during the day to day #vanlife lifestyle. The tension between a desire to be authentic while still maintain an ideal presentation has been recognized in previous literature on identity performance on social media (e.g., Rosenbaum, Johnson, Stepman, & Nuijten, 2013) and appears to be exceptionally prevalent in the visual nature of the #vanlife movement.

This dichotomy could in part be explained by the ideas behind warranting theory (Stone, 1995; Walther & Parks, 2002), which seeks to explain the connection between one's offline self and their online presentations of this self. A warrant, or a seemingly reliable online cue about someone's identity, usually in the form of an image or status update (Walther & Parks, 2002), suggests a connection between one's online and offline self. Since the information posted online can vary in description, detail, and nature, different warrants can have different levels of credibility (Hall & Pennington, 2013). Pictures have been proven to increase a person's credibility, because they are generally seen as more difficult to manipulate (Utz, 2010). In other words, it is easier to present false information through online posts that consist entirely of words, while it is more difficult to lie about posted images. However, as shown by the evidence presented so far, even when using pictures, users still feel the need to control the image they present through their online persona. This results in a staging of the images shared with the #vanlife movement. This staging can include cleaning up the van before taking a picture, finding the right lighting, making sure things are in order, etc. Moreover, it can involve the presentation of the self in a way that reflects the leisure and appeal associated with the movement. It is easier to present and promote false information through online posts that consist entirely of words, while it is more difficult to lie about pictures and images that are posted. Because of this, there is a compensation and need for some control in the images posted in relation to the #vanlife

movement. For example, cleaning up the van before taking a picture, finding the right lighting, making sure things are in order, etc. When individuals are presented as being relaxed and leisurely, there are many efforts that go unseen that contribute to these presented warrants. Through these active efforts, the utilization of the human body to promote a suggested experience was seen as being central to the ways in which the #vanlife identity and experience was presented and made sense of within the data.

#Vanlife as a subculture

The #vanlife movement clearly tries to establish itself as a movement that eschews many of the aspects associated with mainstream American culture, such as homes with power, running water, a yard, and a steady 9-5 job. Analysis of images posted to Instagram revealed that two themes touched on the subcultural nature of the #vanlife movement: The blurring of boundaries between urban and nature, and hominess.

Boundaries between urban and nature

In many of the images that were analyzed for this study, I observed a tension between the role of the van and the surrounding landscape. This tension could be seen in two different ways: The juxtaposition of the interior of the van with the nature outside the vehicle, and the use of wood in the interior of the van.

First, in many instances, the van was displayed in a way that placed nature or the outdoor background as a focal point for the presentation of the interior of the van. Many images showed the back doors or side doors of the van open or partially open, where the viewer would then be looking out into a visually appealing background or view through inside the van. This can be seen in an example explained above, VL247, where the van is parked facing a sunset over a

mountain range and the person taking the picture choose to open the backdoors as a way to frame this vista and incorporate it into their experience in the van. The use of nature as a backdrop is an especially common trend in advertising (Corbett, 2006). In these ads, companies don't necessarily try to sell nature, but these advertisements "are depending on qualities and features of the nonhuman world to help in selling their message" (Corbett, 2006, p. 150). The same applies to the #vanlife movement, where, although nature is not always the central focus of the shared experiences, it is essential in conveying the experiences associated with the #vanlife movement.

This contrast between the interior and exterior of the van was used to frame the images in a way that emphasized the distinction between the inside of the van and the natural environment surrounding the van. Frequently, images challenged existing boundaries between the inside and the outside of the van by presenting the van as a part of the view, where the van serves as a lens to look through in order to see the appealing landscape. As a result, making clear cut distinctions between indoor/outdoor and interior/exterior became more difficult to do. In image vl247, for instance, the low lighting and natural tones throughout the image make the boundaries between the interior and the exterior of the van blend together effortlessly. Throughout the data set, I observed #vanlife members attempting to bring the outside environments inside their vans (or making the interior of their vans a part of the vista outside), blurring the existing boundaries between interior and exterior.



Figure 3: VL105

One particular example, (VL105)⁴, exemplifies this converging of the boundaries as discussed above. As the viewer can see, the individual has parked their van on a field for the purpose of gazing at the stars, while still having a brightly lit van that is reliant upon the power and fuel of the vehicle to generate that light. In addition, the image appears edited: The colors and lighting in the image appear to be slightly altered, as the brightness of both the stars and the van are exceptionally bold. This suggests an equal but prominent focus on both the van and the natural setting in which the van is parked, embodying the duality of the #vanlife movement. The contradiction between the outside and interior light exemplifies the converging of boundaries

⁴ Opt-out consent from the owner of this image was sought through a message sent via Instagram, same message as listed above.

between nature and technology, urban and nature, and immersion in nature and control over it. While the individual is parked in and experiencing nature, he is also able to sit on top of and take advantage of the modern, urban technology encapsulated within his van. This convergence is further captured by comments, where the poster notes how they are close to a city and still able to see the stars, implying that the van makes this possible, and this experience is out of the reach of people outside of this particular subculture. This control over the natural environment is further underlined by the individual sitting on top of the van whose positioning implies control of the van and a controlled immersion into nature.

Second, the use of wood as a building and decorating material inside the van also showed the ways in which #vanlife members combine urban with nature. Wood was frequently displayed as the building material for counter tops, the siding used inside the van itself, bed platforms/frames, and tables/other surfaces in the van. This focus on wood continued to reinforce this blurring of boundaries between indoor/outdoor and urban/nature settings, where #vanlife members are traveling and living closely within nature, while using products from that same natural environment to create their current living environment. Through the use of wood inside the van, members are bringing nature inside of their van and manipulating nature for the purpose of meeting their needs, suggesting the exploitation of nature within and by the #vanlife movement.

In this sense, #vanlife can therefore be thought of as selectively subcultural for numerous reasons. As a movement, #vanlife promotes a respectful and considerate immersion in nature, but actively uses wood as building materials in their vans, which exemplifies the capitalistic, human domination over nature. Additionally, we only see nature, or the #vanlife lifestyle as a whole, through the lens of the van. The van is the presented and used as a tool for experiencing,

presenting, and making sense of one's relationship to nature. This can be seen as relating to literature about the reliance of a subculture on the parent culture (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1975) in order to be considered subversive or subcultural. In the #vanlife movement, the members are reliant upon the means of the dominant culture, i.e., their van, in order to have scenic, free, and independent experiences.

Hominess

The #vanlife lifestyle means to defy the traditional expectation of what one considers to be a home: Its members live in tiny vans, moving from place to place, much like the hobos from the early 20th century and in stark contrast to how many people live their lives today in homes that are fixed dwellings (Cooper, 1974). In spite of this apparent subcultural take on life, the images analyzed for this study show that members of the #vanlife movement still work to present their experience and spaces in a way that aligns with traditional, commonly understood signs of a home. The images that showed the inside of the van included many of the trappings commonly associated with a home, such as throw pillows, rugs, stringed lights, pictures hanging on the wall, and small plants. The use of 'normal' home objects, such as stringed lights, mattresses, throw pillows, sinks and dishes, and materials, such as wood and stainless-steel appliances, within the #vanlife movement suggests a sense of home away from home.



Figure 4: VL256

Although #vanlife members are consistently traveling and rarely call one fixed location ‘home’, they are making up for this lack of stability in their small space in the van. In the image included above (VL256)⁵, examples of these attempts to portray hominess can be seen. The image includes throw pillows, a bed covered in blankets and pillows, a set of burners on the counter top for cooking, a picture hanging from the wall, a small fan hanging above the bed, and an electrical outlet next to the bed. Not only do these items portray permanence and comfort, but they also align with modern understandings of what items are included in one’s home. When posting images on Instagram, individuals may want to make their experiences appealing and understandable for their audiences. This theme suggests further the tension of presenting their

⁵ Opt-out consent from the owner of this image was sought through a message sent via Instagram, same message as listed above. This participant asked to not be kept confidential and requested to be identified.

lifestyle in an authentic and transparent way, while also relying on the socially agreed upon norms of what it means to have or be 'home'.

Much of the existing literature surrounding subcultures (Gelder, 1977, Hebdidge, 1983) raises this idea of subcultures being reliant upon the mainstream culture to determine what is considered subcultural, and how to identify as a subculture in relation to mainstream culture. In this sense, #vanlife members are seen to rely on common items associated with hominess for the purpose of making it clear that the #vanlife lifestyle is different from all modern considerations of home. By suggesting a feeling that one's home is not permanent, while still portraying other aspects of hominess, #vanlife members are able to identify with yet diverge from the mainstream understanding of what a home is. Through these tensions, the #vanlife movement is able to identify with their audiences while doing so in a way that suggests difference and otherness from them. These complex presentations exemplify the mindful, carefully constructed, performative nature of identity performances, specifically in the context of the #vanlife movement and the lifestyles and identities associated with it.

Previously, living in a van or car full time would be considered deviant and dirty. However, as seen through the content analysis of #vanlife posts, members have clean, decorated, modern vans. In this sense, the idea of living in a van has been carefully crafted to mindfully go against the unkempt identity associated with living in a van or car full time. #Vanlife members make a visible effort to not come across as defying the norm too much, and show that living in a van is not out of necessity, but out of choice and pleasure. We are used to seeing these decorations and appliances in apartments and homes, therefore adopting it into the #vanlife movement would be seen as more 'normal' or aligning more to existing expectations of what one's home is supposed to look like.

CHAPTER 4

INTERVIEWS

While the content analysis presented in the previous chapter provided insight into how the various theories about online identity performance play out in the #vanlife movement, it also raises several questions about the nature of this performance. The present chapter aims to resolve some of these by presenting findings from interviews with #vanlife members active on Instagram. The content analysis provided palpable images and performances of the #vanlife identity, while the interviews allowed for more insightful and detailed considerations of these identities.

Data collection

Since the aim of the interviews was to gain insight into the #vanlife movement as it exists on Instagram, I interviewed people actively involved in the movement on that particular platform. Once I received approval from the University of Maine's IRB⁶, the recruitment process began.

Purposive sampling was used to obtain participants for this portion of the research. Purposive sampling, a deliberate choice of research participants based on the qualities possessed by an individual (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016), allows the researcher to decide what needs to be known and seeks to find people who can provide information or knowledge about their experiences (Bernard, 2011). In order to find potential interview participants⁷, I returned to the public #vanlife search page on Instagram and searched for individuals who met the requirements. Participants were selected if they had a minimum of 750 likes on their last 10 #vanlife Instagram

⁶ University of Maine IRB Approval #2018-08-03

⁷ Interviewee information provided in Appendix E

posts, ensuring that these #vanlife posts included the hashtag #vanlife in the caption of the image.

Participants were recruited via an Instagram message sent within the app. An initial recruitment message was sent via Instagram (see Appendix B), and for those who responded to the first message, a second follow up message was sent to obtain a time for the interview to occur (see Appendix C), in addition to the informed consent form (see Appendix D). Approximately 50 individuals were approached to participate in this project: seven ended up following through to the eventual interview. Two interviews featured two participants who indicated a preference to be interviewed together as they lived the #vanlife lifestyle together. All interviews were carried out over the phone, were preceded by obtaining informed consent from the participants, and lasted between 40 and 80 minutes. All audio recordings and transcriptions were kept on a password protected computer and were kept anonymous during the transcription process.

Analysis

Once transcriptions were complete, I analyzed each interview using the same methodology described in the previous chapter. In the case of this study, the goal is to understand the #vanlife movement, the identities associated with it, and to use these insights to augment existing literature. With the #vanlife movement being a relatively new phenomenon on social media, allowing the data to speak for itself and reach its own conclusions was an important part of making sense of the #vanlife identity. With the flexible and open nature of grounded theory, the nature of online identity performance could be understood in a more insightful and holistic way.

Similar to the content analysis discussed in the previous chapter, the analysis process began with sensitizing concepts that were found during the literature review discussed in Chapter 2: identity as performative, impression management, meaning making, social norms, imagined audiences, subcultures, and how all of these occur via online platforms. Once the initial coding process occurred, it became clear which sensitizing concepts worked well and which did not (Padgett, 2004). Some of the concepts that worked well throughout the study was the mindful presentation of identity, socially agreed upon norms within the #vanlife movement, and the #vanlife as a subculture. Similar to the content analysis, the transcriptions were subjected to iterative coding, meaning I frequently revisited the codes and themes for the purpose of maintaining consistency throughout the analysis process (Weber, 1990). Following this iterative coding process, latent themes emerged from the data.

Two themes emerged from the data: The making of #vanlife and understanding the meaning of the movement. The first theme centered on the discussion and consideration of the strategies employed by members of the movement to create #vanlife. When members of the movement described their posts and their experiences as a member of the #vanlife movement, they acknowledged the consideration of their audience before posting content, as well as a disconnect that occurred between their online Instagram posts and their offline, behind the camera, everyday life experiences. The second theme to emerge from the data was the description and defining of the #vanlife movement as a whole. Interview participants provided valuable insights about what they consider to be the definition of the #vanlife movement, the role of the internet in providing a space to define this movement, and how these definitions and considerations may or may not be considered a subculture. Both themes will be described in more detail below.

Making the #vanlife movement

In order for members of the #vanlife movement to construct and create, as well as ensure the identity they have created in the #vanlife movement appropriately matches their intended goal of identity presentation, they must actively engage in social interactions with other members of the movement in a variety of capacities, such as creating posts, sending messages, commenting on posts, liking posts, sharing posts, etc. Through these social interactions, the #vanlife movement is formed and maintained. The subthemes that defined this category were the consideration of audiences when interacting with others through Instagram, and the disconnect that #vanlife members noted between their Instagram posts and the experiences they had in reality.

Consideration of the audience

The imagined audience is a dominant concept in literature on identity and identity performance (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007; Goffman, 1959; Hogan, 2010). When deciding what to post, interview participants expressed that they take their audiences into consideration, and not just when it came to the topic of their post. As stated above, when individuals are interacting online, they frequently have to account for the imagined audience to accommodate for the lack of clearly defined audiences (boyd, 2011). Interview participants indicated that they also think about details such as when to post, the post's caption, the actual post's visual, and how these would appeal to their audiences, who are commonly other members of Instagram. As one interview participant indicated, addressing their acknowledgment of other individuals on Instagram:

I mean obviously you have this audience, and views are important... Because if they're not happy, then how can we grow as well (Interviewee 2)

Since #vanlife members are not always aware of who will be exposed to this shared content, they mindfully consider what to share and post for the purpose of appearing the way their intended audience would want to perceive them. This acknowledgment of the imagined audience (boyd, 2011) was central to the content participants chose to post. When posting content, #vanlife members expressed a desire to please their audiences more than post content that they themselves liked. So, as indicated by the participant below, the assumed expectations of the audience would frequently surpass the #vanlife member's own desires about what to post:

People really want to see the van, but as a photographer, those aren't always my favorite ones to post (Interviewee 3)

This interview participant expressed that although they wanted to post content that aligned with their individual interests, they acknowledged that their audience may not want to see artistic photography posts as much as they would want to see posts that are more focused on the van. In the process of deciding what to take pictures of and eventually post, they indicated an acknowledgement of what they thought others would want to see associated with hashtag #vanlife. Participants were able to understand this based on the perceived socially agreed upon behaviors and performances of identity associated with this hashtag, through the use of likes and comments. Since this is commonly the goal on social media, participants seek to post content that would get a significant amount of likes and comments.

Many participants acknowledged that when they post images and use the hashtag #vanlife, they keep in mind the different ways in which those posts will be interpreted and made sense of by their audiences. For example, if they get feedback through comments or messages that their viewers want to see more images of their vans from the outside and within nature, they

will keep that in mind when deciding what to post or what to take pictures of when using the hashtag #vanlife. This direct acknowledgement of the audience, whether this audience was clearly defined or not, shaped the content that individuals posted. Even if the content was not something that the participant was eager to post, they posted it anyway with the goal of appealing to their audience:

I do try to post van pictures, it's not my favorite thing to post, but the audience likes it, so I will throw that in there... There is definitely some pressure sometimes (Interviewee 6)

When posting images that include the hashtag #vanlife, members posted content with the motivation of appealing to their audiences and aligning with the images commonly associated with the hashtag #vanlife. The norms and patterns seen in the content analysis of this project exemplify how prevalent and influential these social considerations that occur with each individual's decision and process of posting content on Instagram with the hashtag #vanlife.

Disconnect between posts and reality

When deciding what to post and what to include in the images shared in relation to #vanlife, participants also acknowledged the disconnect between the everyday, mundane experiences associated with living in a van from the experiences and images shared on their Instagram. Overall, participants agreed that their Instagram posts often did not reflect their everyday experiences. When discussing the process of choosing what to post on Instagram, participants expressed the active and mindful decision to post content that is appealing to their audiences. One participant used the example of not sharing images that show the amount of work and effort that goes into the everyday reality of being a #vanlife member:

But at the same time, we don't show [certain experiences], so how is someone supposed to know. And obviously if we did show that, it wouldn't get that many likes or engagement and all that stuff...(Interviewee 1)

Participants actively choosing not to post content that reflects the everyday reality of the #vanlife experience emphasizes the desire of aligning with the norms and expectations surrounding what content is to be associated with the hashtag #vanlife. On Instagram, the number of likes on an image and followers one has is a "quantified form of identity recognition" (Dupont, 2019, p.11). In this sense, identity and status can be quantified through the amount of interaction via likes, comments, follows, and shares an image gets (Dupont, 2019). Participants expressed that their desire to get likes, followers, and be perceived as a desirable #vanlife member surpasses their need to be seen as authentic and transparent.

The everyday, mundane experiences had by a member of #vanlife would not be considered socially acceptable or ideal content for those who log onto Instagram to see what the #vanlife experience is. When asked what the #vanlife movement is, one participant expressed that it is:

...something on social media, something people look at, and aspire to or envy, sometimes it's not positive, sometimes it can be misconstrued as this very perfect lifestyle, but it's not...(Interviewee 4)

Participants expressed that although the images that they post on Instagram lead their followers and audience to believe they have a picturesque lifestyle, this is not what the reality of their experiences is like. The findings from the content analysis showed how the majority of the images associated with the #vanlife movement portrayed the van and the #vanlife members in

almost picture-perfect ways. The participant's answers made it clear that this was a mindful and active process, resulting from a lengthy staging and editing process:

I mean, I make them look polished because that's what I would want to see. Or just like, I'm a photographer so I like things to look good. So if something is out of place, I obviously move it. I don't like take pictures of my messy van and post it on Instagram, unless I'm going to be like 'this is my messy van!'. Obviously its calculated, it's Instagram. I feel like people are so, like, intensely trying to figure out Instagram, and it's just like a highlight reel of your life. That's all it is. And so it's okay that we want to post the nice parts, because it is nice...(Interviewee 3)

This quote reveals how much of Instagram's #vanlife is the result of carefully made decisions that attempt to reflect only the positive sides of the movement, as defined by mainstream culture. It shows that the decision to post images on Instagram is a calculated one, and that posting 'honest' pictures, for lack of a better word, is not generally the norm, unless it is a conscious strategy. When a post is shared that includes or incorporates the more mundane, day to day, realistic experiences of a #vanlife lifestyle, it is, as the quote above shows, usually a mindful and meaningful choice. The disconnect between reality and Instagram is thus carefully constructed and maintained by these #vanlife members.

Tools for #vanlife members

The technological affordances provided by Instagram were commonly discussed as being central to the formation and maintenance of the #vanlife movement. Each function provided by Instagram, such as the ability to edit photos, leave comments, connect with other users, and utilize the hashtag function, were associated with the meaning of the #vanlife movement.

Specifically, the role of hashtags was viewed central to the conversations and definitions surrounding what the #vanlife movement is. When members first adopted the #vanlife lifestyle, figuring out the norms and expectations, as well as seeking to connect with other #vanlife members, the use of hashtags was central to these newer members making meaning about what the #vanlife is and how they can become a part of the #vanlife identity. This process of creating and cultivating the #vanlife identity underlines the process of identity creation, presentation, and maintenance as being highly social and interactive:

It just happens that Instagram is the best platform for it, you can use hashtags on Facebook but it's not the same, it just doesn't work the same way. Whereas Instagram is literally how you connect with people and the picture aspect... I mean, the whole artistic and creative aspect, it fits with Instagram. And I think the whole #vanlife community is the strongest on Instagram than other platforms...(Interviewee 5)

By being able to search for and look through posts associated with #vanlife, members were able to get a sense of what the #vanlife identity is. The hashtags served as a place of congregation where the interactive meaning making process among other #vanlife members could also occur. Without the hashtag function on Instagram, it would have been more difficult for members to define and make sense of the #vanlife movement and identity.

Defining #vanlife

From the shared images in association with the hashtag #vanlife, it is possible to create a general idea about what the #vanlife identity is. The #vanlife movement and identity can be considered on the frontstage and backstage level. As previously mentioned, meaning making is a social process, as meaning is made through interactions (Mead, 1934). Additionally, the theory

of normative behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) acknowledges that society's structure of behaviors shapes an individual's behavior, and vice versa. In this sense, meaning making allows for individuals to learn about what norms are prevalent within the #vanlife movement on an intrapersonal level, while also contributing to the norms in the #vanlife movement through interpersonal communication with others. In the context of #vanlife, individuals expressed this mutually informed process. During the interviews, members expressed their personal definitions and ideas about what #vanlife entailed based on their meaning making experiences. The analysis revealed three subthemes: Freedom in defining #vanlife, #vanlife as a subculture, and the tools used to define #vanlife.

Freedom and #vanlife

Many participants described the #vanlife lifestyle as similar to previous movements or lifestyles adopted by those who had lived in their cars or busses, indicating that while the #vanlife movement might logistically be new, it is, in principle, not an unfamiliar concept. One participant provided the insight that without these previous individuals who have lived in their mobile vehicles, there wouldn't be 'no overnight parking' signs posted in parking lots, indicating that the path has already been made by previous individuals residing in their vehicles. Others made a clear connection between the movements from the 1960s and the #vanlife movement:

It came from the 60's era and the 60's mindset... it used to be normal for people to just be nomadic (Interviewee 7)

The use of the phrase "it used to be" also points at the belief that while living in a van used to be fairly mainstream, in today's culture, it is not, clearly defining #vanlife as a subcultural movement.

When defining #vanlife, participants showed a surprisingly flexible approach. While participants identified some minimum requirements for someone to be considered a member, such as the amount of time spent living in a van and travel habits, in many cases, frequent participation on Instagram was not seen as an essential aspect of the #vanlife identity:

I think that anyone who, like, owns a van and either camps out of it or lives out of it or (pauses), you know, has any part in it can consider themselves part #vanlife... you don't have to pass a test or anything like that (Interviewee 1)

Frequently, members discussed that #vanlife can include individuals who do not frequently post on Instagram. In other words, they did not consider there to be a concrete requirement for someone to be a part of #vanlife, including those who do not post on Instagram. In all interviews, participants were found to have embraced the idea of freedom that sits at the foundation of what the #vanlife movement stands for:

And at the end of the day, #vanlife basically means to make your passion your lifestyle (Interviewee 6)

Interviewees expressed that just about anybody could be a #vanlife member, meaning you were not required to post on Instagram, you just had to adopt the #vanlife mindset and lifestyle, which was to live your passion and choose what makes you happiest. In this sense, #vanlife was described as a lifestyle and set of choices, rather than a clearly organized and defined group of people. Although this mindset may relate to the 60's hippie culture, #vanlife members adopt this mindset in a way that is highly visible to others through social media, and tastefully departs from yet appeals to the mainstream culture in a way that the 60's hippie culture did not seek to achieve as much as the #vanlife does. Through the individual elaborations on what is and is not

considered to be a #vanlife lifestyle, there is an apparent agreement that the definition of #vanlife is up for interpretation, and allows for each individual member to define it and embody it in different ways on an individual level.

One interesting finding was that #vanlife members, when discussing what #vanlife entails, made a distinction between views held by insiders and those held by outsiders:

#vanlife can be viewed in a lot of different ways, but it can also be lived in a lot of ways... Other members of the community definitely understand, but I don't think that the general public views it that way (Interviewee 4)

Not only does this concept touch on the prevalence of the audience in identity performances shared and posted by #vanlife members, but it also touches on the distinction between how insiders and outsiders see the #vanlife lifestyle. This suggests that there is a difference between inside knowledge and outside knowledge. In this sense, 'the other' does not understand what #vanlife is, which is central to the way the group #vanlife identity is created. The role of 'the other' in identity formation is discussed as an important consideration of social identity (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, Kamsteeg, 2009). In the process of creating an identity, a person attributes meaning to themselves individually (Gioia, Price, & Hamilson, 2010), while also considering the perspective of the other (Wendt, 1994), with interaction being the connector between the two (Mead, 1934). In the #vanlife movement, 'the other', or the audience who does not share the same understanding of #vanlife experiences, is central to how a member of the #vanlife makes meaning of their identity. Through the 'otherness' experienced, individuals are able to make distinctions and meanings about their own experiences.

Participants pointed to the commercialization of #vanlife, highlighting the contradictions that this created for them in making sense of the movement:

I would say #vanlife isn't necessarily a movement. I think... the monetization of #vanlife, because it's here embedded in the movement... it's definitely not a new thing... I would say if it were a movement, it would be like the idea of being more free spirit vibe, like hippie generation a bit...the monetization of #vanlife though, I think, is a movement. And I think that people are starting to see that you can make money by monetizing #vanlife. I would say that more so is what the movement is. Just like putting the pictures up and all that stuff (Interviewee 2)

This particular individual reflects on the idea that the commercialization of lifestyles has become much more common, and that this has become part of the #vanlife experience as well. But the participants makes it clear that when they think about #vanlife as a movement, it is the free spirit aspect of it, i.e., the part of the experiences that renders it subcultural. In other words, while monetization is seen as a “necessary evil”, it is not recognized as defining the movement by members of that movement at all, who effectively ignore those aspects of #vanlife that render it more mainstream than subcultural.

Defying the norm

For many participants, being a part of the #vanlife movement meant they were somehow defying the norm. This social norm was discussed as being the 9am-5pm job, having a home, having children, owning a car and so on, and participants clearly indicated they felt they were defying this:

Rebellious.... I'm trying to think of if I think I'm actually rebelling. I think in the like traditional word sense, yes, because society has one idea...The idea of a way of living, what I'm doing is not traditional, therefore I'm kind of rebelling. Or just doing things differently. And it wouldn't be rebelling from anyone, just from what everyone else is doing (Interviewee 1)

One of the social norms that the participants felt they were defying was the prioritizing of work and success over happiness and doing what you want to do. Many participants believed that in today's society, the social norm was to follow along with the same path as everyone else:

And when you think about the norm, you think about what most people are doing. And I think in life right now, that's going to school, get a job, work...have a family, that whole thing. Not live in a car, but live in an apartment, get a house, have some babies, get a dog...(Interviewee 5)

In #vanlife, the realities and lifestyles of members did not reflect this norm. They placed much more importance of following their passion and living the life they wanted to live, regardless of the societal expectations. Participants expressed that the #vanlife movement was an escape from those expectations. Through the act of choosing to live their lives in a way that made them happy and was what they wanted to do, they recognized that they were going against the norm.

Participants, however, did not necessarily see this as a direct act of rebellion:

It can be viewed as rebellious, when in reality, it's just you living the life you want to live. So that's the funny part, because in no way do we look to each other and say like 'yeah, screw society, we're gonna live this certain way'. We see it as 'oh, this is normal. We're just living our life and we are happy' (Interviewee 3)

What was interesting however, was that each participant defined happiness and success differently. While some took the approach most often captured by mainstream media's representations of #vanlife (Monroe, 2017), defining success as a fully free lifestyle, others saw getting followers and sustaining themselves while on the road as more important:

...views are important, no matter who you are or what you're doing, with the algorithms and everything...with Instagram, if people aren't watching your content, you're not going to do as well (Interviewee 2)

This finding is particularly interesting as it reflects how #vanlife, while often portrayed as subcultural movement, clearly has elements that are very much in line with mainstream expectations. This could, in part, be attributed to the monetization of Instagram, where making money off one's posts is an increasingly popular and accepted trend (Diaz, 2018), revealing how the social norms that are prevalent in the larger society still manage to penetrate seemingly oppositional movements such as #vanlife. When asked if they perceived themselves as being part of a subculture, participants expressed that they didn't see themselves as living their lifestyle with the goal of forming a subculture or directly opposing society, but rather just living their life in a way they want to, while other people happen to be doing a similar thing:

I think that anytime you do something against the grain of society, it can be viewed as rebellious (Interviewee 5)

This quote reflects the reliance upon dominant society when defining what the #vanlife is and is not, similar to the consideration of a subculture relying on the parent culture (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1975) acknowledging the power dynamics between the dominant culture and the subculture. In order for #vanlife members to consider themselves rebelling or having

subcultural characteristics, they measured themselves against the norms, behaviors, and expectations of the dominant society. In order to identify as a member of the #vanlife movement, participants acknowledged that their presentations of identity were not mainstream.

The #vanlife movement, although suggesting a sense of ‘otherness’ from mainstream culture, relies on the dominant, mainstream culture to define themselves. The role of the intended or anticipated audience, norms, and reliance upon the dominant culture to determine what is considered deviant from mainstream all further exemplify the social nature of identity creation and performance, including identities within the #vanlife movement. In order to understand what deviant or defiant behavior is, there must be a process of interaction and socialization to determine what is socially acceptable and what is not. Without these social interactions, it would be unclear how the #vanlife lifestyle and identity is defined, exemplified, and perceived.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The goal of this thesis was to cultivate a deeper understanding of identity performance as it occurs through technology, specifically social networking sites. Specifically, this research explored concepts of identity and identity performance on the social media platform Instagram. I considered what classifies as an identity performance, how these ideas differ from existing literature on identity, and investigated the role of the audience in the creation and maintenance of online identities. In order to do this, this thesis investigated the #vanlife movement – a movement created and sustained through its presence on Instagram. This movement relies heavily on Instagram to create meaning, communicate, and connect with other members of the movement. Due to the inherently social nature of the #vanlife movement, it made for an ideal case study for understanding identity performance in a new way.

In order to create a complete understanding about identity within the #vanlife movement, data was collected in two ways. First, the #vanlife identity was analyzed through a content analysis of Instagram posts that included the hashtag ‘#vanlife’. Second, this project included semi-structured interviews that occurred with self-identified members of the #vanlife movement, but were initially targeted by the researcher. Both portions of this project were analyzed using grounded theory. Since the #vanlife movement is relatively new and unfamiliar, I deemed it imperative to allow the data to speak for itself to better understand the nature of identity performance and connect it to existing work.

The research questions posed at the beginning of the research project before data collection guided the process of constituting methods for this research. The first research

question sought to understand the role of Instagram as a social networking site in the #vanlife identity. The second research question called for a consideration of how the findings from this research may either converge with or diverge from existing literature on identity. Related to this process of understanding identity, the third research question aimed to explore the role of the audience in these considerations.

Identity performance is closely connected to one's social environment, the communities with which one identifies, and how one defines those communities. Subsequently, the fourth research question was (a) How do people active within the #vanlife movement define this movement? (b) To what extent do their understandings of the movement reflect the principles of the networked (counter)publics proposed by boyd et. al.? This grounded understanding about what the #vanlife is was further elaborated on through the questions posed in the fifth and final research question: (a) What behaviors define the movement? (b) Do members see themselves as being part of a subculture?

The content analysis and interviews revealed several main findings. First, identity creation is a mindful process. Second, the dichotomy between backstage and frontstage that Goffman first identified in the 1950s is still very much alive in the era of Instagram. Third, when considering #vanlife as a subculture, it is clear that in order to define themselves as different, members of the #vanlife movement relied, in varying degrees, on the dominant, parent culture to make sense of this movement. Furthermore, while #vanlife members like to think of themselves as subversive, the movement relies on dominant cultural understandings of home and visual appeal more than the interviewees admitted. The fifth and final finding was that the platform used to portray and communicate the movement was central to the way the movement is defined:

The affordances present on Instagram were frequently acknowledged as part of how the #vanlife movement exists and continues. Each of the findings will be explained in more detail below.

Mindful identity creation

The concept of identity as a performance and presentation sheds light on the idea that as humans, we are actively choosing what to portray and share with others, with the understanding that through the behaviors that we exhibit, individuals will make sense of them to form an understanding of who we are. In the content analysis, this active and conscious process was highlighted by the ways the #vanlife identity and experience was portrayed as a neat, organized, and relaxed lifestyle, in contrast to the many difficulties or challenges that come with living in a van.

The ways individuals were portrayed in the #vanlife images also suggested that Instagram users actively choose to portray themselves in a certain way. The average #vanlife post consisted of happy, clean, orderly looking individuals. Their vans were presented as always being clean, the landscapes that they were parked in were commonly portrayed as visually appealing despite how long they have been there or how they got there, and #vanlife members were dominantly shown as smiling and happy. When considering identity as a presentation, it would be seen that through the active process of choosing what to post, #vanlife members chose to post their experiences in a way that aligned with what identity they wanted people to assign to them

This active process was acknowledged in the interviews, where #vanlife members expressed that they make a mindful effort to present themselves in a way that encourages a positive interpretation of their sense of self by others. Interviewees talked about how people would view their posts, and how they posted images that they themselves would like to see as

well, effectively placing themselves in the shoes of their audience. While the internalization of the audience has always been a factor in identity theories (as evidenced by work in the areas of symbolic interactionism and social identity theory), it has become more pronounced in the era of social media platforms. When in physical, face to face interactions, it is easier to make sense of who one's audience might be, or if there is an audience at all. When posting on Instagram, one knows there is an audience, but it is also more difficult to decipher who the audience is.

The role of the imagined audience was discussed as being central to what individuals chose to post on Instagram with the hashtag #vanlife. In the interviews, #vanlife members expressed their acknowledgement of a wide variety of individuals being able to see their posts. Because of this, they discussed being mindful about how different audiences may perceive their content and kept these considerations in mind when choosing what to share.

This finding reinforces the existing considerations and literature surrounding the performative and active nature of identity presentation, specifically in the context of online, social media platforms.

Dichotomy between frontstage and backstage

Goffman's dramaturgical approach argues that one's identity consists of one's frontstage self, which is what others see, and the back-stage self, which is what only that individual or a select few, trusted individuals will see (1959). The analysis of the images associated with the #vanlife movement showed that in most instances, the identity presentation that takes place through Instagram are frontstage presentations of self. Images show beautiful people in beautiful settings, driving tidy, well-organized vans – not the kind of images one would expect from people who live on the road 24/7. Interestingly, it also seems that #vanlife members work hard to

make their posts have a backstage feel: Often people are featured half-dressed, lounging on their beds, or shown in other ways that one would commonly associate with private behaviors.

Through the interviews, it became clear that #vanlife members make a conscious decision to portray their lifestyle in the most positive way possible, arguing that that is what their audiences wish to see.

#Vanlife members acknowledged this differentiation between the frontstage, or what is included in their shared online images, and the backstage portion of #vanlife, which is generally kept off Instagram. The backstage realities of #vanlife were discussed by members as going days between taking showers or even having running water, the difficulties experienced when getting to the beautiful landscapes shown in the images, and other ‘behind the scenes’, mundane behaviors. Occasionally, a #vanlife member would post images that shared these less presentable or appealing behaviors, but these posts included explanations why the #vanlife member chose to share their experiences in this way. Although this could be seen as backstage presentation, the decision to explain the posts makes it clear that this is considered a deviation from the norm, and not something these #vanlife members want associated with their movement.

It is thus clear that #vanlife members, through the presentation of frontstage behaviors on Instagram, wanted to ensure that their identity would be perceived and made sense of in a way that aligned with the generally accepted understanding of the #vanlife movement as a carefree, nature-centered experience. It also highlighted the different definitions and perceived expectations surrounding the lifestyle of one who lives in a van full time without using social media, and one who actively posts about and shares their experiences using the hashtag #vanlife on social media, particularly Instagram. In the interviews, participants expressed the disconnect they perceived between the social media portrayals of their experiences (frontstage

presentations) and the everyday, mundane, back stage presentations that occur and that they made sure to keep off the platform. This acknowledgement emphasizes the active process of sharing a frontstage #vanlife image on Instagram and cultivating a #vanlife identity.

Defying the norm: #Vanlife as a subculture

Many early understandings of subcultures use the term ‘parent culture’ when describing culture vs. subculture. The use of the term ‘parent’ suggests that there is a power structure between the two (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1975), with one culture dominating over the other. This power structure highlights the process of defying the more dominant culture and living one’s life in a nonnormative way as central to a subculture’s identity (Gelder, 1977). In order for a behavior to be considered nonnormative, there has to be a norm that it is being compared to or measured against.

The #vanlife movement exemplifies this reliance upon a ‘parent’, more dominant culture, for the purpose of establishing a sense of otherness or defiance. This can be seen in the way they are defined as having a different lifestyle because they do not live in a traditional home, they do not commonly work the traditional 9-5-day jobs, they do not live the ‘average’ lifestyle. Without the dominant culture, it would be impossible for a #vanlife member to determine how to act nonnormatively. Many considerations of what the #vanlife movement is, are due to its otherness from common understandings of home and day to day activities.

When it comes to defining #vanlife as a subculture, findings were mixed. While #vanlife is commonly understood in relation to its difference from mainstream culture, this defiance from the dominant, parent culture, is not as defiant or completely separate from the dominant culture as it portrays itself to be. This can be seen in the way that #vanlife solely exists through the use

of a highly prevalent and well-known social networking site, in this case Instagram.

Additionally, without the reliance on mobile cell phones and all of the capabilities of these phones, #vanlife members would not be able to share, present, or communicate in the way they currently do. Without the widespread installation of cell phone towers, individuals would not be able to check their emails or share their images while immersed in nature.

In the content analysis, #vanlife members can be seen as being reliant upon common tools and products in their images, such as cell phones, laptop computers, their vehicles, light fixtures, etc. When defining a subculture and considering the behaviors that make up a subculture, these technological affordances are central in the process of defining that subculture. During the interviews, individuals expressed that while on the road, they commonly relied upon places with free Wi-Fi, public places to access running water, and other publicly available goods, they would not be able to sustain the #vanlife lifestyle for long periods of time. The products that go into making the #vanlife lifestyle do-able and sustainable for long periods of time are born of and maintained by the culture and institutions that the #vanlife movement claims to actively defy. Hebdidge (1979) defined subcultures as being a resistant response to mainstream culture, claiming that members of a subculture will take items from the mainstream culture and create oppositional meanings for them. Within #vanlife, members would take these commodities (Hebdidge, 1979), and use them for their own purposes.

However, some of the interviewees had clearly developed norms that differed from mainstream social norms, such as refusing to connect happiness to their work. Gelder (1977) claimed that a subculture is a group of people who live their lives in a non-normative way, where these non-normative practices are shared with others who have a similar way of living (Cohen, 1955). In this sense, the #vanlife movement could be considered a subculture because of the fact

that it is mainly made up of individuals who are living in a non-normative way. At the same time, others discussed the monetization of #vanlife as being the movement, meaning the tendency of many #vanlife members to rely on the monetization of their lifestyle, such as being sponsored or financially supported for presenting their experiences in certain ways. Similarly, content analysis revealed that #vanlife members make their vans as homey as possible, in a way that aligns with dominant understandings of home, and that the presentation of the people in the images reflected dominant beauty standards. So despite the claim made across the movement that the #vanlife movement serves as a subversive, subcultural movement, the movement is in fact not as nonnormative as it is commonly perceived to be.

The platform defines the movement

When seeking to define the #vanlife movement, much of what makes #vanlife so different from other lifestyles or movements is broadcasted through images on Instagram. These public displays of identity and experience shape the general understanding about what the #vanlife movement is. Therefore, when making meaning of or assumptions about the movement, this is done so entirely through the use of the technological and social affordances available through Instagram. This platform allows for things that other platforms do not, thus playing a central role in defining what the movement is.

When considering identity construction and presentation, it can be argued that the #vanlife identity is reliant upon what Instagram as a platform affords and encourages. If Instagram affords its users to make images brighter through the use of filters or put a hashtag in the caption of their image, linking them to existing #vanlife members, the #vanlife identity would then be associated with bright and appealing images, and as using the hashtag on posts. If

the #vanlife movement were to be present on other social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, these associations and definitions of the #vanlife identity would differ.

The findings from the content analysis revealed that the #vanlife had adapted to the affordances provided by the platform. For example, members of the movement acknowledge that Instagram as a platform emphasizes the posting of visually appealing images, where the images are the focal point of the content shared. Because of this, members have acknowledged that when using Instagram to express authentic membership within the #movement, they must post photos that align with other #vanlife posts, such as focusing on nature or editing their photos in certain ways. They are able to make meaning of what other #vanlife posts include because of the hashtag function, which takes viewers to other images including hashtag #vanlife. Instagram as a platform allows for the inclusion of text and hashtags, leading #vanlife members to utilize these affordances and connect with other #vanlife members, emphasizing the visually appealing nature of the movement. However, it is also not entirely fair to argue that the entire #vanlife identity is constrained by the affordances provided by Instagram. As previous research has indicated (Rosenbaum, 2019), individual social media users actively redefine, reshape, and manipulate the various technological affordances to better meet their needs.

Limitations

This research did have some limitations. The data collected both through the interviews and the content analysis was not representative, as the time period for the project only allowed for a small window of data collection and analysis. While 300 images were analyzed during a set time period, the content being shared in association with the #vanlife is frequent and constantly updated. Additionally, the interview data was comprised of self-selected individuals, allowing

for potential biases present within the data set. Furthermore, the interview did not include any questions about the participants' demographic data. During the course of the analysis, it became clear that certain information about the participants, such as their general location, length of time as a #vanlife member, their source(s) of income. would have been valuable to further understand and interpret the provided perspectives and insights into the #vanlife identity and experience. Finally, this study only looked at what #vanlife looked like on Instagram. As mentioned in the introduction, there is a "van life" that exists outside of social media. This thesis was not able to examine this lifestyle and discuss how it compares to its mediated sibling.

Future Research

Future research should consider the use of field observations, as these could substantially aid in the findings of future research. Both of the present methods, the analysis of Instagram posts and semi-structured interviews, relied on the use of phones. When assessing the identity and experiences associated with the #vanlife movement, being able to see the realities in relation to the content shared online would lead to more meaningful considerations of not only the #vanlife identity, but identity performance as a whole.

As mentioned earlier in my thesis, there are individuals who live in a van but who don't rely on Instagram to share their experiences. A participant observation or ethnographic investigation of these people would allow for further insights into their lifestyles, allowing for a comparison between their lifestyle and the lifestyle associated with the #vanlife hashtag. These in-depth insights would allow for a deeper understanding of how social media shape identity construction and presentation,

Socioeconomic status (SES) and race is another aspect of this study that could be elaborated on more in the future. Questions of SES and race were not addressed in the research questions or the interviews. Such questions, however, could provide valuable insight into notions of class and privilege and how these connect to the #vanlife movement.

Final Conclusion

This thesis sought to further understand the nature of identity and identity performance, specifically through the use of technology and social media. In order to do this, the #vanlife movement on Instagram was used as a case study. The findings strongly supported the conceptualization of identity as social, performative, and mindfully constructed, as the analysis of the #vanlife movement on Instagram showed how the process of presenting people's experiences and identities online is an active, well thought-out choice. Similarly, the consideration of an individual's frontstage and backstage selves (Goffman, 1959) was found to be highly relevant to identity performance in the social media age, albeit in a slightly different manner from Goffman's original ideas. Previously, the distinction between the two stages was seen to be clearly defined and separate, however the #vanlife movement exemplifies how these boundaries have become blurred and more complex, with #Vanlife members frequently merging the boundaries between what is thought of as being backstage behavior and frontstage behavior.

The #vanlife movement was also seen as defying the norm of general societal expectations, although members of the movement go about defying the norm in a way that demonstrates a reliance upon the greater society. In this sense, the #vanlife movement had some subcultural qualities, but complicates the clearly defined distinctions between what constitutes a subculture and what does not. Instagram as a social media platform also played an important role

in defining the #vanlife movement. Had the #vanlife movement existed on another social media platform in the same way it does on Instagram, the meanings surrounding the movement would differ. For example, if the #vanlife movement existed on Twitter, a platform that does not rely as heavily on visual representations, the active effort to alter the presentations of self would be through text, rather than through images. This would lead to a different nature of identity presentation and performance, leading to a difference in identities associated with the movement. Less emphasis on visual representations of #vanlife may have resulted in different norms associated with the lifestyle, such as less of an emphasis on tidiness or cleanliness within the vans and the #vanlife members themselves.

This research suggests that considerations of identity, subcultures, and the role of technology within these understandings must be frequently revisited. Previous understandings of these concepts provide meaningful frameworks for considering modern occurrences of identity presentation, however with each new technological affordance that is provided and implemented, these notions must be reexamined.

The findings from this thesis, from both the content analysis and interviews, highlight the complexity of online identity presentations. While the content analysis suggests an effortless and easily navigated capturing of the #vanlife experience, the interviews highlight the mindful and carefully constructed process that underlies these visual representations. Understanding these processes through which individuals choose to capture, share, and interactively perform their identities online contribute to the larger conversation surrounding identity construction and performance, specifically through social media.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Timing	Part	Topics
~5 min	I	<p><u>Introduction:</u></p> <p>Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview process.</p> <p>1: Were you able to read over the informed consent form?</p> <p>2: Did you have any questions about any of the content of this form?</p> <p>3: In summary, the consent form states that you in this interview, I am going to be asking you about your experience as a member of the #vanlife movement and will asking you to reflect on concepts of identity. Some of these questions may make you feel uncomfortable, in which case you are welcome to refuse to answer the question or end the interview at any time. Your name and identity will be kept completely confidential throughout the research process. The audio recording from this interview will be deleted once the transcription process is completed. By participating in this research, you can aid in the expansion and creation of new knowledge and applications related to the concept of identity.</p> <p>4: Do you have any questions about anything?</p> <p>5: Do you consent to participating in this interview?</p> <p>6: (In the case of an interview with more than one person): I do ask that you do not share anything that is said during this interview with people outside this group, is that OK? Do you have any questions or concerns about this?</p>
~5 min	II	<p><u>Personal identity:</u></p> <p>1: Would you consider yourself a part of the #vanlife movement? Why?</p> <p>2: What aspects of your identity make you feel as though you are/aren't?</p> <p>3: Do you feel as though you have to present yourself a certain way in order to be considered a vanlifer?</p>
~5-7 min	III	<p><u>Overview: #vanlife</u></p> <p>1: From your perspective, what is #vanlife? How would you define it?</p> <p>2: How would you describe the #vanlife identity? (what makes someone a #vanlifer?) How would you describe them?</p> <p>3: Are you aware of who the first person to 'create' or cultivate the #vanlife movement was? Do you know their story?</p>

		<p>4: Would you say that your identity lines up with the commonly perceived #vanlife identity? Why or why not?</p> <p>5: Would you consider it a movement? Why or why not? When does something become a movement?</p> <p>6: How did you come to know about #vanlife?</p> <p>7: Do you think there was such thing as a van life before Instagram? If so, do you think it was the same, or different? Why or why not?</p>
~7-10 min	IV	<p><u>Posts:</u></p> <p>1: What are some of your motivations for using the hashtag #vanlife on your posts? What must a post have in order to use the #vanlife hashtag? What does/does not qualify?</p> <p>2: Can you describe an average #vanlife post that you create? How about others? Are there standards for a #vanlife post? Things you should absolutely not do? Why?</p> <p>3: Can you describe your favorite post (by yourself and by another #vanlifer)? Why do you like that post so much? What about your least favorite post?</p> <p><i>Note: If the conversation lends itself to the participant providing an example of one of their Instagram posts, the opportunity will be provided, allowing the participant to share one of their #vanlife Instagram posts.</i></p> <p>4: What motivates you to use Instagram as a platform for sharing your #vanlife identity? What motivates the posts that you create?</p> <p>5: When expressing or sharing your identity, what do you want people to know or see about you? How do you ensure that they see that?</p> <p>6: Is #vanlife something that only trends on Instagram? Why or why not? Would it work on Facebook or Twitter too (assuming it is not active there)?</p> <p>7: Do you feel as though your Instagram identity reflects your offline identity? Why or why not?</p>
~5 min	V	<p><u>Audience:</u></p> <p>1: Who do you perceive as the audience of your posts? How do you know who sees your posts? Do you ever get responses from people who don't know what the #vanlife movement is? How do you handle that?</p> <p>2: Do you take your audience into account when you post about your #vanlife experience?</p>

		<p>3: Do you see this as a positive or negative thing?</p> <p>4: What kinds of responses do you get to your #vanlife posts? Do these responses ever make you change what you post? Do you ever get responses from people who don't know what the #vanlife movement is? How do you handle it?</p> <p>5: Do you ever respond to comments on your posts? Can you tell me about your experience in doing so? When do you? What do you say? Do you ever respond back?</p>
~2-5 min	VI	<p><u>Subcultural Contextualization:</u></p> <p>1: Do you feel as though your actions or lifestyle are rebellious in any way? If so, rebelling from who?</p> <p>2: Does the #vanlife movement seem to be defying the 'norm' in some way? If so, how?</p>
~2-5 min	VII	<p><u>Conclusion</u></p> <p>1: Do you have any questions in regard to the interview that just occurred?</p> <p>2: Do you have anything you would like to add before concluding?</p> <p>3: Are there any other #vanlife members you recommend me reaching out to with request to participate in an interview for this project?</p> <p>3: Thank you very much again for your time and contributions.</p>

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT

Recruitment email to members of the #vanlife community on Instagram

Hello,

My name is Jessica Bergstrom and I am a master's student in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of Maine at Orono. I am in the process of studying the #vanlife movement to understand how people in this movement view their own identity.

Studying this topic will provide valuable insights into the role played by social media in people's identities. By engaging in interviews with #vanlife members, I hope to understand more about how members of the movement identify themselves in relation to the #vanlife movement, how they act to maintain a #vanlife identity, and how they take their perceived audiences into consideration when presenting their experiences in certain ways.

The interview process is expected to take 30-45 minutes to complete. Interview participants must be at least 18 years old. Audio will be recorded from the interview, but audio recordings will be deleted once the transcription process has been completed. Names will not be used during the transcription process. This interview can take place over the phone or skype, but if there is another resource that would work better for you, I would be happy to discuss other options. If you have any further questions about my research, my goals, or anything else in relation to this project, I would be more than happy to discuss them with you.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration,

Jessica Bergstrom

APPENDIX C: REPSONSE EMAIL

Email following a response to recruitment email (Appendix B) from potential research participant. This email will also have the informed consent form attached.

Hello,

Thank you for taking the time to read and respond to my previous email. I look forward to continuing to work with you on this research project!

How would you like to participate in the interview process (In person (if applicable), over the phone, or over Skype)? Is there another method that would be easier for you that is not listed here?

Is there a certain time that would work best for you to participate in the interview (day of the week, time of day, etc.)?

Attached to this email, you will find an informed consent form. Please read this form, and let me know if you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the form, and I would be happy to discuss them further with you. During the interview process, I will ask you to acknowledge that you have read and agreed to the content in this form, so it is important that you are familiar with it.

Thank you again for your time and consideration during this process,

Jessica Bergstrom

jessica.bergstrom@maine.edu

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: **Social identity theory and the #vanlife movement**

Principal Investigator: Jessica Bergstrom

jessica.bergstrom@maine.edu

M.A. student at University of Maine

Department of Communication and Journalism

Research Advisor: Judith E. Rosenbaum

judith.rosenbaumandre@maine.edu

Assistant Professor at University of Maine

Department of Communication and Journalism

You are asked to participate in a research project entitled “**Social identity theory and the #vanlife movement**”, seeks to deepen the understanding of identity theories in relation to modern examples and movements, as well as contribute new perspectives and knowledge to such theories. In order to gain this insight and perspective on your position within the #vanlife movement, we are asking that you consider and reflect on how and why you consider yourself a part of the #vanlife movement, and how you feel you relate to or differ from others who are part of the #vanlife movement. In order to participate in this research project, you must be at least 18 years of age, an active #vanlife Instagram user, and either be currently living in a van or have been making conversions to your van for at least 3 months prior to the interview.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this research project, an interview will be conducted, which will consist of prompted questions that you will be asked to answer in relation to your #vanlife identity. The interview process is expected to take between 30-45 minutes to complete. This process can take place in person, over the phone, or Skype. If there is another method which would be more convenient, please feel free to recommend it. You have the option of bringing additional #vanlife members who you feel would provide valuable insight into the project. All members participating in the interview process must provide consent. The interview will be

audio recorded. Questions will be related to your personal experience in relation to the #vanlife movement, such as “in your opinion, what is the #vanlife movement?” and “how do you share with others on Instagram that you are a part of the #vanlife movement?”

Risks

It is possible that this interview will interfere with your everyday routine, creating a temporary inconvenience for you. In addition, the interview could take up to 45 minutes, which could place a burden on your schedule.

Benefits

Although there are no direct benefits to you, your insight and knowledge will contribute to what is known about identities and complexities within the #vanlife movement, as well as contributing to the overall discussion of identity as a phenomenon.

Confidentiality

During the interview process, you will be asked to use a first name to identify yourself, but you may use a fake name if you choose. When transcribing the interview, your name will not be used, you will only be identified using a random number. Once the transcription process is complete, the audio file will be deleted, which will occur no later than June 1st, 2019. The transcription will be kept safe on a password protected computer no longer than June 1st, 2023. In interviews that consist of more than one interviewee, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, however all interview participants will be asked to maintain confidentiality. There is potential for content from the interview to be used in published content, but your name and identity will be kept completely confidential.

Voluntary

This interview is completely voluntary, you do not need to participate in the research. If the interview has begun and you would like to stop, you may absolutely do so. You also do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to.

Contact information

Any questions or concerns in relation to this research project can be directed to Jessica Bergstrom at jessica.bergstrom@maine.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, 207/581-1498 or 207/581-2657 (or e-mail umric@maine.edu).

Your time and consideration are greatly appreciated. Please feel free to reach out with any questions or concerns regarding this form or research project.

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEWEE DEMORGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Interviewee 1	Female
Interviewee 2	Male
Interviewee 3	Male & Female
Interviewee 4	Male
Interviewee 5	Female
Interviewee 6	Female
Interviewee 7	Male & Female

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Jessica Bergstrom was born in Lowell, Massachusetts on February 22nd, 1995. She was raised in Belfast Maine and graduated from Belfast Area High School in 2013. She attended the University of Maine and graduated in 2017 with a Bachelor's degree in Communication and a minor in Renewable Energy: Economics and Policy. She continued her education at the University of Maine, where she entered into the graduate program in the Communication and Journalism Department. After receiving her degree, Jessica will be accepting a job in Portland, ME. Jessica is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in Communication from the University of Maine in August 2019.