

Cultivating Connections in 140 Characters: A Case Study of Twitter Relationship Building

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Social media use is ubiquitous in the United States. Not surprisingly, an academic debate has emerged about whether or not computer-mediated communication facilitates or hurts interpersonal relationships. This exploratory case study adds to the conversation by assessing how Twitter users in the Wichita, Kansas community view the impact of Twitter on their social lives, specifically, communication and relationships. Using a grounded theory approach and inductive thematic analysis, this paper analyzed data from a two-phase study involving key informant interviews (N=15) and six focus groups (N = 32). Three themes emerged: Twitter and professional relationships; Twitter and personal relationships, and Twitter and community. Analysis indicated that Twitter is a robust tool used to build and maintain interpersonal and community relationships that range from shallow and impersonal to deep and meaningful, depending on the desires of users, all in 140 characters or less.

Keywords: Twitter, personal relationships, community, social media

A newer resident of Wichita, Kansas who moved here with her husband so he could attend school found Wichita a difficult place to live. For three years she said she hated the city. She felt isolated and had trouble making friends. The feelings persisted, she says, until she decided to try the Twitter social network platform. As she spent more time on the network, friendships emerged, and she described, for the first time, becoming enmeshed in the community. For her, she says, Twitter helped transform her view of Wichita.

This woman does not appear to be alone, as millions have used such social networking sites to connect with others in and out of the communities in which they live. With the widespread diffusion of the Internet in the late 1990s, social networking websites quickly followed. These sites allowed users to develop personal profiles, link together, and share information. Such sites generally follow a user-friendly template, making the creation of a profile an easy task for even the least technologically savvy computer user. As such, the popularity of social networking has skyrocketed in the years since, with a recent statistic indicating that social networking accounts for 28 per cent of all time spent online, while microblogging sites, including Twitter, comprise 13 per cent of that time (Mander, 2014). A Pew Research Center survey showed Twitter as the fifth most popular social media platform with 23 per cent of online American adults using Twitter (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015).

However, response to this trend in the academic community has been largely polarized. While some scholars and practitioners (e.g., Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Wright, 2004) have suggested that computer-mediated communication, in particular text-based CMC, can be a powerful conduit for relationship building and meaningful social interaction, others (Bos, Olson, Gergle, Olson, &

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Wright, 2002; Miller, 2004) view text-based computer mediated communication as a poor quality substitute for meaningful face-to-face communication and social interaction. Putnam (2000) sees modern communication technology as the downfall of social engagement, while Carr, (2010), Turkle, (2011) and Morozov, (2011) view social media as a threat to cultural cohesion, intellectual growth, and personal happiness. Clayton (2014) joins this conversation arguing that Twitter use has an indirect effect on marital harmony leading to “greater amounts of Twitter-related conflict among romantic partners, which in turn leads to infidelity, breakup, and divorce” (p. 425).

As social networking is still an emerging phenomenon, little is known about how such sites are utilized, and to what ends they may help or hurt communication and relationships. Even less research has investigated specifically how microblogging sites, such as Twitter.com, fit into this equation, with most research having focused on older and more popular networks such as Facebook.com (Chen, 2011). However, as Twitter now boasts 500 million tweets per day (About Twitter, Inc., n.d.), it has become one of the fastest growing social media sites (Chen, 2011), making its analysis a necessary component of understanding the social media landscape. A few studies have looked at Twitter users’ motivations (Java, Song, Finin, and Tseng, 2007), as well as uses and gratifications (Chen, 2011) experienced by those accessing the site. Still, no known studies have specifically investigated how members of a local community use Twitter, and how this use plays into relationship dynamics. With this in mind, the current investigation offers an exploratory case study in how Twitter.com users in the local Wichita, Kansas area view Twitter as impacting their communication and relationships.

Literature Review

Twitter and Relationships

Social networking sites are described as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Twitter currently reports close to 300 million active monthly users worldwide (About Twitter, Inc., n.d.). Twitter.com falls under the umbrella of microblogging, a form of social media that “shares modal qualities of instant messaging ... shared publicly online” (Ballard-Reisch, Rozzell, Heldman, & Kamerer, 2011, p. 57). Microblogging takes its name from a sites’ limiting of posts to a set number of characters, typically 200 characters or fewer. Twitter limits user’ posts to 140 characters. Thus, posts are relatively short compared to regular blogging; microblogging allows users to quickly spread and digest condensed nuggets of information (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). As noted above, a few studies have attempted to understand general motivations, uses, and gratifications for utilizing Twitter. What has emerged from the literature are two primary schools of thought. On one hand, some scholars point to Twitter as just another social network, promoting impersonal and mostly superficial social connections (i.e., Huberman, Romero & Fu, 2008). On the other hand, another body of work (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Chen, 2011) supports the idea of Twitter as a distinctive social space, which despite its limited character count, fosters a unique form of relationship building and maintenance among users.

Huberman, Romero and Wu (2008) questioned if Twitter users were having meaningful communication with most members of their network, defined as followers and followees. The researchers cited previous scholarship (Golder, Wilkinson & Huberman, 2007) showing that users of the Facebook social network only poke and message a small subset of their larger friends group. In order to investigate if a similar phenomenon occurred on Twitter, they analyzed a data set of public tweets from 309,740 Twitter users, who on average posted 255 times, and had an average of 85 followers and followed 80 users. Results mirrored the Facebook study, showing that Twitter

users on average had a much larger number of followers and followees compared with the number they regularly kept in touch with on the network via public messages. Based on this finding, the authors make the assertion that “most of the links declared within Twitter were meaningless from an interaction point of view” (p. 8).

Alternatively, a growing body of literature evidences that Twitter’s microblogging format should not be analyzed one tweet at a time, but instead forms and sustains meaningful relationships as each tweet, over time, forms a cohesive picture of its authors. In his in-depth *New York Times* article, Thompson (2008) described how, “Each little update — each individual bit of social information” may be mundane on its own, but, “taken together, over time, the little snippets coalesce into a surprisingly sophisticated portrait of your friends’ and family members’ lives, like thousands of dots making a pointillist painting.” Marwick and boyd (2011) take a parallel view, arguing that Twitter provides “digital intimacy” and can “serve a social function, reinforcing connections and maintaining social bonds” (p. 119). Their study, which asked Twitter users about topics such as their imagined audience, what makes a user seem authentic, and what they would not tweet about, showed evidence for what they label a “context collapse” where users mentally flatten multiple audiences into one. Further, while they show that Twitter is often used for furthering “microcelebrity” and self promotion, it is also largely used by, “people with few followers, who use the site for reasons other than self-promotion,” and “generally see Twitter as a *personal* space where spam, advertising and marketing are unwelcome” (p. 125).

A related line of research has presented evidence that Twitter users often use the network to foster communication and interaction. For example, Java and colleagues (2007) examined Twitter’s topological and geographical properties to understand Twitter usage and communities, with results labeling types of users who employed the network for reaching out to others about various topics. The study identified three types of Twitter users: information sources, friends, and information seekers. The study reports that each of these types of users utilize the network for various social purposes, including daily chatter about current happenings, conversations between users, sharing information/URLs, and reporting news. Similarly, Chen (2011) applied a uses and gratifications framework to argue that individuals “form social relationships with media actors who are other people on the social network” (p. 756). The survey of 317 Twitter users found that the more months a person had used Twitter and the greater the number of hours per week spent on Twitter, the more their need to form a connection with others was gratified. Further, frequency of tweets and number of @ replies, or “public messages between Twitter users” (p. 755) mediated this relationship. Such findings support the idea of relationship facilitation via the social network.

Whether, Twitter is a place for superficial interaction or relationship building may be a question answered better by the individual user rather than an analysis of the Twitter ecosystem. Hughes, Rowe, Batey and Lee (2012) found that some use Twitter in a utilitarian fashion for information gathering and cognitive stimulation while others used the platform for social purposes. Other scholars have investigated if and how specific functions of the network, such as the retweet and tweets using the @ symbol, facilitate meaningful dialogues among users. Boyd, Golder, and Lotan (2010) analyzed both case studies and empirical data involving the retweet function to examine if it serves to simply amplify information or perpetuate a larger conversation.

Results showed a variety of socially based conversational reasons for retweeting, including commenting on a tweet someone else made, making one’s presence as an audience for the original tweet known, publicly agreeing with someone or validating their thoughts, showing loyalty or friendship, or recognizing the tweets of less popular Twitter users for a larger audience. Further, the authors recognize that “Retweets can knit together tweets and provide a valuable conversational infrastructure. Whether, participants are actively commenting or simply acknowledging that they’re

listening, they're placing themselves inside a conversation" (p. 7). On a like note, Honeycutt and Herring (2009) analyzed a sample of public tweets to better understand the role of the @ symbol in conversation. Their study provided evidence that the @ sign heightened dialogues between users, and promoted conversation between two users, as, "More than 90 per cent of tweets with @ addressed an individual, as opposed to having some other function" (p.8) and at least 30 per cent of tweets using the @ symbol elicited a public response. Thus, they argued that the examples of extended conversations presented here showed that some users were already taking advantage of Twitter for informal collaborative purposes.

Wichita, Kansas Twitter Community

Wichita, with a population around 386,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014) is located in south-central Kansas. The most current U.S. Census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014) shows that racially, the state is largely Caucasian (71.9), 11.5 per cent black, 1.2 per cent American Indian and Alaska Native, 4.8 per cent Asian, 0.1 per cent Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander. 15.3 per cent report Hispanic heritage. 10.2 per cent were foreign born. 16.5 per cent report that they speak a language other than English at home. 87.2 per cent have obtained a high school degree or higher, with 28.2 per cent going on to obtain higher education. The median household income in Wichita between 2009 and 2013 was \$45,011, with 17.6 per cent of Wichitans living below the poverty level.

Religion plays a big part in the Wichita community. The city has 512 Protestant churches, 20 Catholic churches, 2 Jewish Synagogues, and 66 other religious congregations ("Wichita, Kans.", n.d.). About 51 per cent of the Wichita population identifies as "religious," meaning that they affiliate with some type of faith; this is slightly higher than the national average of nearly 49 per cent ("Religion in Wichita, Kansas", n.d.). Additionally, Wichita skews largely conservative, with about 58 per cent of voters registered as Republican, 39 per cent registered as Democrat, and 2 per cent registered as Independent ("Voting in Wichita, Kansas", n.d.).

Research Question

The limited scope of data on Twitter and relationships leaves unanswered questions about Twitter and relationships and Twitter and community. The following research question will be addressed in this study to begin to assess the nature of these relationships: How do Twitter users see Twitter as impacting their relationships?

Methods

In order to answer the preceding research question, this study utilized key informant interviews and focus groups organized into two phases. Potential participants were identified for both phases by compiling a list of all Twitter users within a 25-mile radius of Wichita, Kansas. Potential participants for both phases were identified by searching Twitter for zip codes posted on participant profiles. Phase 1, targeted 15 of the most experienced, engaged, high volume Twitter users in the area for conversation about the relationship between Twitter and relationship development, maintenance, and dissolution. Number of posts, number of followers, and number following statistics were used to identify potential participants for this phase. The top 60 users were sorted into three groups of 20. Initially, the top 20 users were invited through direct message or tweet to take part in one-on-one interviews. Three users from the second list of 20 were ultimately invited to participate in order to complete the 15 interview target for Phase 1.

As an elaboration on the findings of Phase 1, Phase 2 invited local Twitter users to discuss the relationship between Twitter and relationship development, maintenance, and dissolution. For

this phase, a random sample of 100 Twitter users in the Wichita, Kansas area drawn from the previously identified pool was selected. Those who participated in Phase 1 were excluded from participation in Phase 2. These potential participants were again invited through direct messages and tweets. Thirty-two participants took part in Phase 2 focus groups.

Seven pre-determined questions, used as discussion prompts in both key informant interviews and focus groups, are relevant to this analysis.

- (i) Have you developed any new relationships on Twitter?
- (ii) Has Twitter had any impact on pre-existing relationships?
- (iii) Do you use Twitter as a tool to help you maintain relationships?
- (iv) Have you ended any relationships on Twitter?
- (v) Have you ended any relationships because of Twitter?
- (vi) Have the people in your offline life expressed concern, jealousy, or feelings of being left out of your "online life" on Twitter?
- (vii) Do you see yourself as part of a Twitter community?

While key informant interviews and focus groups centered on these questions, spontaneous exploration of emergent topics was encouraged and facilitated through participant assertion and interviewer/ moderator initiated probes as interviews and focus group discussions developed.

Participants

Of the fifteen participants who took part in Phase 1 key informant interviews, nine were female with a mean age of 34 years. The six males averaged 31 years. Eight of the participants had a college degree, six of them female. Three of the women had advanced degrees. All participants were Caucasian.

The participants in Phase 2 focus groups were twenty two females (67 per cent) and ten males (33 per cent). The mean age for females was 33.4 years, for males, 40.2 years. The participants were mostly college educated (74 per cent), another 20 per cent had some college or an associate's degree. All participants used other social media in addition to Twitter; 94 per cent were on face book. 95 per cent were Caucasian.

Procedures

Phase 1

Those agreeing to be interviewed for Phase 1 were emailed informed consent documents and a copy of discussion questions. Interviews took place on the phone between the interviewee and 1 or 2 of the researchers. Discussions lasted between 15 and 27 minutes.

Phase 2

Participants met at the university, completed informed consent documents, and were randomly assigned to one of six discussion groups (four will be used in this analysis). The groups were directed to separate classrooms where three graduate students facilitated each discussion. Discussions were audio recorded. One graduate student acted as group moderator; one student acted as real-time note-taker, and one student took notes on flipchart paper posted around the room to capture and remind participants of content as the discussion progressed. Discussions lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

Analysis of both key informant and focus group data took a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), utilizing Boyatzis' (1998) techniques of inductive thematic analysis. This approach assumes an iterative process of coding data to reveal a set of emergent themes. Because the purpose of this study was to develop a coherent, layered picture of the impact of Twitter on relationship development, maintenance, and dissolution in the Wichita Twitter community, and because the main themes for both key informant interviews and focus groups corresponded well, data analysis will be discussed across methodologies. Data analysis was also organized into two phases. For each phase, data were reduced to comprehensive data files for each interview or focus group with general, emergent themes and specific quotations noted. Transcripts were read again to clarify and refine notes into completed data files for each interview/focus group. Content was then analyzed across data files within a methodology (e.g. key informant interview or focus groups) in order to identify commonalities and uniquenesses and to identify themes. Once this step was complete, content was reanalyzed between methodologies to refine and clarify themes, commonalities and uniquenesses.

To identify commonalities and uniquenesses, data were color-coded and then sorted into themes (major overarching categories) and subthemes (categories within each theme). Three themes and eight subthemes were extracted through analysis. The three themes were: Twitter and Professional Relationships; Twitter and Personal Relationships (subthemes: Maintaining Existing Relationships, Friendship Formation, Romantic Relationships, Users vs. Non-users, Relationship Termination); and Twitter and Community (subthemes: Transformation of Local Community and Membership in Multiple Twitter Communities).

Results

Twitter and professional relationships

Engaging professionals, customers and businesses

Analysis indicated that study participants used Twitter for professional purposes which varied somewhat, but generally dealt with the development and maintenance of relationships with professionals. One interviewee called the professional aspect of Twitter "invaluable," stating, "It has enhanced and broadened my network of professional relationships." Several respondents echoed this idea, indicating that they used Twitter for networking.

Many said they had started using Twitter for work obligations and were able to easily connect with other professionals through the platform. One cosmetologist said another user had introduced her to a job opening, which she recently applied for; another user stated she had found out about a national conference relevant to her profession through Twitter. One user who was interested in becoming a police officer said it gave him the opportunity to meet community members who would be integral in his new job.

From a business strategy standpoint, several users also recognized the potential for using Twitter to create and maintain relationships with customers. A web developer said all of his web development projects in the last six months had come through Twitter. Yet another user stated he had hired a fellow user to help him with a website because he was impressed with his pro-bono work for a Twitter community-related project. Similarly, one woman said she had used Twitter for her fundraising efforts. She said, "I've gotten a lot of support in terms of people showing up to the events. I've gotten sponsorships for the causes. I've had people just be supportive overall, so it's been a tool in terms of a professional tool ..."

As Twitter enhanced many users' ability to develop professional relationships and networks, this connectedness often translated into transactions with businesses that utilized Twitter. Several users stated that Twitter was useful in becoming acquainted with and learning about businesses. It was often looked to as the first source of news about businesses, especially local ones. Several users suggested that Twitter offered a more "personal" platform to communicate with businesses, creating a more intimate consumer experience. One woman's comments echoed those of several users. She said she prefers to do business with companies she tweeted with versus others. "Following businesses, it makes it personal. I see your products. It's really neat to see that personal aspect be put to a business." As one participant concluded, "I've met realtors, store owners. From The Donut Whole to a new house, I can find it on Twitter."

It should be noted that a few users indicated they preferred to keep their work and personal interactions separate, with some going so far as to create separate Twitter accounts for work and personal use, or to unfollow users when they became coworkers. For example, one interview participant did not want to risk a bad impression with a new employer and subsequently modified Twitter settings upon being hired. The participant stated, "When I got my new job, I unfollowed my boss and protected my tweets." Still, as one user stated, personal and professional often "comingle" on Twitter, helping ignite relationships that benefit users in both arenas.

Twitter and personal relationships

Maintaining existing relationships

One aspect of Twitter echoed across users was its ability to help in maintaining existing relationships. Many users recounted the ease with which they could keep in touch with friends and family through Twitter. They noted it was often easier to keep up with people's day-to-day lives via social media than with traditional media such as telephone. Some individuals stated they felt even more connected to friends and family through utilizing the application. As one user stated, "It's a good way to say a word here and there to keep each other fresh in each other's mind ... sort of a minor way of maintaining a friendship." Similarly, another user said that for her, "Twitter is great for maintaining relationships because I can easily check on people and find out if there is something going on that they need help with, or good to know about, something great I can congratulate them (for), or just stay in touch that way." Another user said he was easily able to keep up with former coworkers or friends who had moved away using the social network. He said, "In the course of a day, I've gotten tips or have been informed of developments in their lives via Twitter that maybe I wouldn't have gotten until who knows when, simply because of the immediacy of it."

Friendship formation

Several participants stated that strong friendships had formed from the Twitter community, and had budded into real-life social interactions. In Wichita, face-to-face meetings among Twitter users often occur at "Tweet-ups" (organized gatherings of Twitter users). One woman explained the nature of Tweet-ups as a "safe connection." She said, "When we have Tweet-ups it's like very public. ... you're not so scared you're going to end up with a creeper sitting at your table." Users also noted wine nights and book clubs among local Twitter users. Some users said these relationships had filled voids in their social lives. One participant who didn't know many people before Twitter stated, "This has been a whole new world for me. I'm mostly a homebody. I'm not involved in a church... I was very isolated trying to find like-minded people." Other users reported that "most" of their friends were from the Twitter community, and that they had not been friends prior to meeting on Twitter.

While one person stated that their Twitter relationships were typically “shallow,” other users described a different experience. One woman likened a new friendship to a “lightning bolt” as it struck up so quickly. Another stated that she expected she could easily translate the online connections into real-world friendships, as she felt like she’d known some users forever, referring to language choice and “the way they tweet” as cues to their real-life personalities.

Perhaps this easy forming of friendships among users can be explained because of the environment Twitter provides. Many people expressed that Twitter provided a “safe” place to make friends, one that many said fostered trust among users. One person stated that she’d felt comfortable enough to allow a fellow Twitter user to babysit her children. Another stated, “I think it’d be hard to lie about who you are for very long on Twitter. If you’re doing a lot and talking to a lot of people, it would be very difficult to not be who you are.” One user articulated the progression through stages of friendship facilitated by Twitter and other social media. She said, “For me it goes from Twitter to Tumblr to Facebook and then (instant messaging). That’s how I build relationships. And then of course there’s meeting a person and all that.”

Romantic relationships

Several users expressed that they had used Twitter as a means of forming romantic relationships. One woman expressed that a friendship formed via Twitter had blossomed into a romantic relationship, while a man said he had gotten “several dates” via the social network. Another man had met a former flame on Twitter, and the relationship with his current girlfriend came from a Tweet-up.

By and large, though, it seemed the main romantic use of Twitter was to maintain pre-existing relationships. Several significant others or spouses recruited their partners to Twitter. Similarly, some interviewees said that their significant other joined Twitter as a means to keep up with their lives online, and some took it even a step further. One woman said of her two previous boyfriends who joined Twitter, “I think they joined Twitter so they could see what I was doing, and that felt really awkward because I felt like they were snooping on me because I was the only person they were following, and they are not really tweeting, so that’s kind of weird.”

Users versus non-users

With such a distinct sense of community among many Twitter users, it is no wonder that another emerging theme was the discord between Twitter users and non-users. Specifically, many users referred to an underlying tension between those who tweet, and those who don’t, largely grounded in a misunderstanding among non-users about the functionality of the social network. A few mentioned comparisons between Facebook and Twitter, with non-users of Twitter often puzzled as to what distinguished the two platforms from one another. Other users mentioned that family members often expressed annoyance at the “addictive” nature of Twitter, which may have spawned some feelings of jealousy. Two women agreed that their husbands both, “got tired of going to bed alone,” while their wives were up late on Twitter. Another woman recalled how her daughter had voiced similar complaints. Several participants voiced that their spouses and families simply didn’t “understand” or “get” the appeal of Twitter, again emphasizing the divide between users and non-users. Such misunderstandings often led to exchanges ranging between light-hearted to annoyed, with one woman recalling her husband rolling his eyes at the notion of Twitter, and another woman describing her sister calling her a “Twit.” Another woman recounted a similar dynamic with her husband: “Yes. My husband is not a tweeter. He calls Twitter ‘Thumper’ and says, ‘Are you thumping again?’ But, the more he’s been around it, the more he sees the value.”

In line with a number of other participants, one woman stated that as her spouse became more understanding and ultimately started using Twitter himself, he saw its utility. She said, “But, the more I explain it to him and the more he’s around the people I’ve become friends with on Twitter,

he sees the benefits and he sees how it helps my job. We've made some really good friends because of it ... He couldn't comprehend it because he didn't do it. He gets it now." Similarly, others have said they have been able to enlighten their friends about the utility of Twitter. One man said, "There have been a few people who have said, 'You're on Twitter; that's dumb,' and then I've explained what I do, and they say it makes sense."

Relationship termination

Twitter users could identify very few conditions that would lead them to discontinue following a fellow Twitter member. One such condition, though, was disrupting the efficiency of the site (i.e., posting excessively, clogging feeds with one-on-one conversations, etc.). It is important to mention that once probed, participants admitted that in some cases, misalignment of interests or views could ultimately lead to unfollowing others. A type of third-person effect seemed to emerge in the sense that most people did not admit to deleting users because of expressing different views via Twitter; instead, they said it is something they've seen happen in other cases. Third-person effect refers to an individual's perception that a message will exert a stronger impact on others than the self (Davidson, 1983). Still, at least a few participants explicitly admitted to deleting others whose views did not mesh with their own. One participant said, "You follow and realize it's not really my interest. It's like do I really need to see their tweets... It's not like something they did something wrong to hurt a relationship. It's just not that interesting for my time." In line with this, at least a few indicated that followers had unfollowed them, often for unspecified reasons, or, in several cases, because they had differing viewpoints on issues like politics.

What also became clear was the overt low-investment, high-reward attitude that many Twitter followers expressed toward friendships. Participants indicated repeatedly that one of the upsides of Twitter was the ability to discontinue following as easily as they began. With just a click, a user could be unfollowed. Again, it should be emphasized that most indicated when they did choose to unfollow, which was rare, it typically was not a decision about the person, but rather a decision about inefficiency or misaligned interests. What is implied is an easy, no-fuss ejection from the relationship. As one man stated, "It's like, poof. I quit following them. I didn't choose to write something that says I'm done with them." Another woman stated, "I blocked some people or unfollowed people, but I would say that everybody I blocked or unfollowed—I haven't met them personally. I didn't feel like there was ever a relationship, so you can't really call it ending a relationship."

What is even more interesting about this is the feelings that emerged from those who had been unfollowed. Though most participants seemed to think unfollowing another user was not typically to be taken personally, when unfollowed themselves, they seemed to express at least some upset. One woman stated, "I haven't ended relationships, but I know some people ... said I'm going to unfollow you." Another participant remembered how a friend had stopped following her, leading her to wonder what she had done to bring this about.

Twitter and community

Transformation of local community

Users indicated that twitter had transformed their perspectives about their local community. Many indicated they had been in the local area for quite some time but had only found a sense of belonging once they made local connections via Twitter. One woman who had moved to the city so her husband could attend school said, "I hated Wichita for three years. Once I started getting involved in Twitter, it's kind of changed the way I viewed Wichita." Another woman said Twitter had enhanced her sense of community in the Wichita area. She said, "Twitter is like a surrogate family

or friends, and I know that if I say I need something ... I would get an answer." She went on to say, "If I had a heavy piece of furniture to move ... and I had no one to help me, if I said, 'Can someone please help me?' they'd be over in a minute. I just feel that confident about it." Another interviewee had a similar experience: "It has completely rebuilt my sense of community in Wichita because it has given me the chance to know lots of people I wouldn't have crossed paths with — intelligent, well-meaning people. It has just enriched my life."

Membership in multiple twitter communities

Most users did not seem to feel a part of one large Twitter community, but instead of several different Twitter communities. The list feature on Twitter, which allows users to customize who to follow and how to organize them into lists, led most participants to indicate that they have formed or are members of multiple sub-communities on Twitter. One person might be a part of a local community, a professional-based community, and an interest-based community. Another might have Twitter lists of friends from contexts, families, and gaming communities. As one user stated, "I feel like I'm part of two or three based on who I am as an individual ... who I am, where I live, and what I think."

Summary and Insights

Study results indicate that the Twitter platform allowed users to build and maintain relationships in professional, personal, and community spheres. Relationships discussed ran the gamut from shallow links, to career connections, to strong friendships and romantic relationships. Data from both key informant interviews and focus groups indicated that Twitter acted as a medium through which users could connect, share ideas, and progress to varying levels of intimacy according to users' desires and at their leisure and pace. As with many popular social media sites, a culture emerged surrounding the world of Twitter in this community. While users seemed to most frequently use Twitter to maintain existing relationships, they also used it as a basis for making connections, sometimes progressing further into more intimate stages of relationship. This also occurred in tandem with other social media sites and sometimes led to in-person interaction.

Over and over, users stated that Twitter made their lives "easier" and, compared to other media platforms, made better use of their time. By design, Twitter simplified the spreading and digesting of information, forcing users to condense thoughts into 140 characters or less. One of the more obvious uses of Twitter for relational efficiency was the ability to more effectively communicate. Participants articulated that social transactions became easier as they were able to simply write a message without having to pick up the phone or type out an e-mail. Even transactions such as wishing friends a happy birthday became more time efficient. One user articulated the appeal of doing so via Twitter. "It's easier than going to Hallmark" to buy a birthday card. Such efficiency encouraged users to send well-wishes, enhancing the notion of community. As one user stated, "I've gotten more happy birthdays online from virtual friends than I did from my own family." Several participants indicated that Twitter made these processes more convenient. It was as easy to catch up on posts or send a tweet in the middle of the night as it was the middle of the day.

For members of the Wichita Twitter community, existing relationships were maintained through ease of communication, often beyond what would have been possible in day-to-day, face-to-face interaction. For new relationships, the progression from Twitter connection to physical-world friendship was not an uncommon occurrence. Face-to-face meetings, often through Tweet-ups, allowed users a comfortable and safe environment to ease into physical-world relationships. New relationships were formed and developed professionally and personally based on common

interests and engagement. Professional networks were expanded and users sought out businesses with whom they perceived a personal relationship. The development of friendships and romantic relationships were not unusual. Twitter did at times bring about at least some tension between users and non-users. This tension was often mediated when the user could demonstrate the utility of Twitter to the non-user. Most interesting was the finding that users saw themselves as part of one or multiple Twitter communities, often populated by their closest friends and family members.

Conclusions

Results of this study correspond well with classic interpersonal communication theories. Relationships developed by study participants demonstrated substantial variety in depth and breadth (Altman & Taylor, 1973) depending on users' goals and interests. The process through which these relationships were developed was highly consistent with the typical relationship development stages discussed by Knapp, Vangelisti and Caughlin (2013).

While a great deal of previous scholarship has focused on quantifying interactions via Twitter, the current study adds context to this discussion, by addressing the perceptions of Twitter users regarding the use and impact of this platform on the development, maintenance and dissolution of professional, personal, and community relationships. Many users described how Twitter facilitated meaningful and, in some cases, deep relationships, sometimes initiated and carried out entirely through the social network. Such descriptions stand in stark contrast to Huberman, Romero and Wu's (2008) claim that Twitter promotes superficial, impersonal interactions. Rather than being a poor quality substitute for face-to-face communication and relationships (Bos, et. al., 2002; Miller, 2004) or the downfall of social engagement (Carr, 2010; Turkel, 2011; Morozov, 2011), findings of this study support the conclusions of Marwick and boyd (2011) that Twitter provides "digital intimacy", reinforcing connections and maintaining bonds (p. 119). Results also diverge from assertions by theoretical frameworks such as social presence theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), social context cues theory (Kiesler, Sieglar, & McGuire, 1984; Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991), and media/information richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Daft & Lengel, 1986), all of which posit that text-based communication lacks the warmth, involvement and social cues to foster meaningful interactions.

Overall, the findings of this study support the assertion by Tidwell and Walther (2002) and Wright (2004) that text-based CMC can powerfully support the building and maintenance of social interaction. They are also consistent with claims made by boyd and colleagues (2010, 2011), Chen (2011), Java et al., (2007) and Thompson (2008) that Twitter creates a distinctive social sphere that fosters the development and maintenance of relationships among users. Additionally, findings of this study fall more in line with frameworks such as channel expansion theory (Carlson & Zmud, 1994; Carlson & Zmud, 1999), which posits that users' increased experience with a medium equates to perceptions of media richness, and social information processing (SIP) theory (Walther, 1992), which asserts that while it may require more time than face-to-face interactions, text-based communication can lead to the building of intimate relationships online.

What emerges is the portrait of a social media platform that, not in spite of, but because of the very nature of its efficient, limited text-based interaction, fosters meaningful relationships. New and meaningful professional and personal relationships can be formed and developed; existing personal relationships can be enriched, and community connections can be enhanced through Twitter. The results show that users are not so much "bowling alone" as Putnam (2000) suggested, but instead, reaching out, meeting up, and engaging in new and meaningful ways. In an often cluttered, over-crowded media world, users describe Twitter as a tool that allows them to efficiently

navigate and manage relationships that range from shallow and impersonal to deep and meaningful, depending on the desires of users. Not only can users do this on their own schedule; they can send and receive messages in easily digestible nuggets of information limited to 140 characters or less.

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