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## Navigating Digital Identity as Graduate Students: Perceptions and Experiences Influencing Performativity in Higher Education

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**NAVIGATING DIGITAL IDENTITY AS GRADUATE STUDENTS: PERCEPTIONS  
AND EXPERIENCES INFLUENCING PERFORMATIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

**Samantha Ryan Szczyrek**

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Faculty of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education  
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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April 17, 2023

## **DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone's copyright nor violate any proprietary rights and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices.

I declare that this is a true copy of my thesis, including any final revisions, as approved by my thesis committee and the Graduate Studies office, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores and makes visible how graduate students perceive, experience, and perform their digital identity. It will explore how graduate students' perceptions and experiences influence the navigation of their digital identity, using Goffman's (1959) performative theory and Tajfel & Turner's (1979) social identity theory to address the phenomenon of performativity on Social Networking Sites (SNSs). This research study will deepen scholarly understanding of the phenomenon of performativity in higher education. There is a need to understand this as the phenomenon of performativity is ever-present for graduate students as they navigate context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013) between academic identity and personal identity on SNSs. This study aims to acknowledge and gather information on graduate students' lived experiences and perceptions as they navigate their digital identities. Guiding this study is the following research question: How do graduate students pursuing higher education use their perceptions and experiences to navigate their digital identity on SNSs in relation to being both emerging scholars and social network participants? This thesis uses a qualitative phenomenographic study of seven higher education graduate students in Ontario, Canada, to understand their perceptions and experiences regarding SNSs as emerging scholars and social network participants. Key findings from the perceptions and experiences highlighted in this study emphasize the phenomenon of performativity for graduate students, whether occurring knowingly or unknowingly when basing navigational decisions on (1) self-fulfillment; (2) context collapse: academic and personal identities; (3) social influence; and (4) call-out culture.

**Keywords:** *digital identity, social networking sites, higher education, digital scholarship, technoculture, performativity*

## DEDICATION

In dedication to everyone else trying their best to figure *it* (life, themselves, research, etc.) out.

Don't get so caught up in focusing on the finish line that you forget to enjoy the journey.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my supervisor, Dr. Bonnie Stewart, thank you for your guidance, understanding, mentorship, and support. I am eternally grateful for your compassion, reassurance, honesty, patience, and humour during this process. I am thankful for your unwavering belief in me, my ideas, and my abilities – and for reminding me of what I am capable of during moments where I felt less than capable. You taught me more than just how to survive the thesis process – how to navigate academia, how to approach my big ideas without compromising my passion, and how to advocate for what I believe in.

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***“I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it.”***

***— Pablo Picasso***

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

SNSs	Social Networking Sites
REB	Research Ethics Board
M. Ed.	Master of Education
Gen Z	Generation Z

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

#### **Introduction**

Over the years, society has undergone continuous development using various technologies (Linturi, 2000). As the digital era progresses and evolves, Social Networking Sites (SNSs) permeate aspects of daily practices, such as work, education, and communication (boyd & Ellison, 2008). On a global scale, the users of SNSs access the platforms for multiple reasons, expressing themselves and their interests to curate a digital presentation of self (Cover, 2015).

Academic identity is how individuals perceive themselves in an educational domain, a dimension of a more significant, global self-concept (Howard, 2003). Winter's (2009) definition of academic identity aligns with Howard's (2003), as the author refers to how individuals define themselves based on their connection to their organization or institution. In contrast, digital identity refers to the signifiers that people express to present their presence in a digital context within the digital environment (Cover, 2015). For emerging scholars using SNSs, there are specific versions of academic identity that manifest on the Twitter or Instagram platforms since academic identity becomes a representation within the user's digital identity on the SNS. An academic digital identity differs from the academic identity that occurs offline, within higher education institutions, but also differs from the digital identity individuals present when solely using SNSs for personal expression. Therefore, this thesis presents the academic digital identity as a combination of one's academic identity and one's digital identity occurring in the same digital environment for emerging scholars.



Digital identity is the online representation of a person's identity (Cover, 2015; Sunde, 2022). It includes information about an individual available online, such as their name, image, personal information, interests, and opinions. This information is often stored in databases and can be accessed through various digital platforms, such as SNSs. A digital identity is created and maintained through a combination of factors, including the data a person provides to digital platforms, their online behaviour and interactions, and the information generated about them through tracking and data analysis (Cover, 2015; Sunde, 2022). Essentially, digital identity is a multitude of small performative acts occurring in one place (the Internet, and more specifically, SNSs) through navigational approaches that curate a digital presentation of self for every user. Navigation, in the context of this thesis, refers to how individuals navigate their digital identity: whether through keeping their profiles public or private, openly engaging with others through comments and likes, or curating content through posts, as examples.

A critical aspect of digital identity is that it does not necessarily tie into an individual's physical identity. Individuals can create multiple digital identities or pseudonyms to represent themselves online, which can have positive and negative implications as it allows individuals to express themselves freely and without the physical limitations of their offline identity. It can also lead to a negative digital footprint (Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, 2022). As Balick (2023) states, the performance of identity is already a partial representation of oneself, but it becomes even more fractured when expressed in the digital environment. Overall, digital identity is a complex and dynamic concept constantly evolving as technology and society change. Individuals need to be mindful of their digital identity and understand how it affects their online and offline reputation and identity.

As graduate students, digital identities on networks such as Twitter and Instagram integrate into academics, forming academic and professional outreach and engagement opportunities. Boté (2018) acknowledges that establishing an online presence may help graduate students in their personal and professional lives and benefit the higher education institution they are enrolled in. However, this navigation may also jeopardize their academic identity or scholarly reputation within the institution (Boté, 2018) when juxtapositioned with personal use of the sites to connect with friends and family and share subjective images and opinions (boyd, 2013). The ability or inability to maintain privacy, construct individualistic identities, control identifiers, decide what is known about themselves, and even disconnect their actions from their identifiers may have profound implications for individual and group behaviour (Kerr & Barrigar, 2012).

### **Background and Context**

Erving Goffman uses a detailed and descriptive analysis process to construct meaning surrounding the presentation – or performance – of individual identity through group relations, environmental influences, and the interactive meaning of information sharing (Goffman, 1959). Using a dramaturgical perspective, Goffman considers how individuals present themselves and their activities to others, how they guide and control the impression that viewers construct, and how they exhibit overt and covert behaviours to sustain the performance (Goffman, 1959). The performative theory highlights how individuals attempt to control the impression of others, regardless of the individual's objective or motive. When the desired performance is achieved, the results are that viewers voluntarily construct – albeit invisibly manipulated by the individuals' performance – an opinion or impression that is in alignment with how the individual wants to be perceived (Goffman, 1959).

In this thesis, I draw on Goffman's theory of performativity (Goffman, 1959) to specify how interactions are viewed as performances, influenced by the digital environment they are displayed in and the potential audience(s) who may view them. The individual SNS user performs their digital identity, opening themselves up to impressions from audiences. Nevertheless, these displays of self align with the desired goals of how the individual wishes to be perceived (Goffman, 1959). This research concerns how graduate students, as both emerging scholars and users of SNSs for personal expression, attempt to control the audience's perceptions of their digital identity through deliberate or undeliberate – although not always conscious – impression management and performance of self (Goffman, 1959).

Performativity can be a core element of social identity creation, according to Marwick & boyd (2011) and boyd (2013). According to Cohn (2019), the nature of SNSs is performative, as individuals base the value of their digital identity on recognition through follows, likes, and shares – engagement with the content they curate on their SNS profile. One public example is Kertu Tenso, a student pursuing her Ph.D. in health services research at Boston University's School of Public Health, who has also accumulated over 18,000 followers on Instagram (Bersi, 2022). As a graduate student and an SNS user, she uses her Instagram account to demystify academia and empower others, focusing on encouraging women to take up space in both academic and STEM settings (Bersi, 2022). As Bersi (2022) states, Tenso acknowledges how her digital identity presentation on Instagram extends the digital and digital academic communities into her real life, allowing for connections and meaningful relationships with other creators in the academic field (para. 7). From a performative lens, Tenso uses Instagram to deliberately appeal to other first-generation graduate students, women in STEM and the academic sector as a whole, and graduate students in general. Tenso uses her digital identity to curate content that focuses on

destigmatizing mental health, offering advice to prospective graduate students about the process and elements of graduate school, day-in-the-life-style videos, and free resources and supports for individuals looking to build knowledge and skills in research and academia (Bersi, 2022).

The social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) used in this thesis aims to specify the circumstances under which individuals tend to think of themselves as individuals or group members while also considering the consequences of personal and social identities for individual perceptions and group behaviour (Levine & Hogg, 2010). This theory is deeply rooted in structural symbolic interactionism, much like Goffman's, as identity theory assumes that individuals form identities through social interaction and that these interactions are perpetually structurally embedded (Davis, 2016). As Davis (2016) states, an individual's social media accounts are proximate social structures, fixed within the intermediate social structure of all those who use the particular social networking site, embedded within the sizeable social structure of a digitally connected society (p. 141). In direct reference to this thesis, I argue that academia in the digital era is a social structure in which graduate students must learn to navigate. Due to the pervasive nature of digital technologies and the social media platforms that may be accessed through these devices trickling into the learning environment, many students must navigate SNSs as both emerging scholars and social network participants for personal expression (Boté, 2018). Students can decide how they present themselves on SNSs in the digital environment; however, despite their attempts to control their presentation, interpretations from viewers may not always reflect their best efforts (boyd, 2001).

Performative theory is not often explicitly discussed in the context of digital identity navigation at a higher educational level. Salman (2015) mentions that discussions regarding students' digital identity practices occur at the elementary and secondary levels, emphasizing

safety and privacy. However, the conversation is not as prevalent in higher education institutions. This thesis posits performativity on SNSs by graduate students as a widely experienced, yet rarely discussed at the higher institution level, emerging phenomenon of the digital age.

Research driven by phenomenon aims to capture, document, and conceptualize an observed phenomenon of interest to facilitate knowledge creation and awareness (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2016). According to Van de Ven (2016), a research phenomenon could be any problem, issue, or topic chosen as the primary subject of an investigation that originates from personal experiences and insights. I argue that the inability to engage in open discourse and resonate with how other students' perceptions and experiences influence their digital identity navigation is a significant impediment for graduate students in the digital age. Therefore, I aim to contribute to the conversation about the phenomenon of performativity at a higher education level. I am open to this research influencing this perception in the sense that findings from the study may alter it and lead me to reconsider how the perceptions and experiences of other graduate students influence their navigation of digital identities.

The idea of performativity circulates in sociology or anthropology fields but not within academia or society particularly broadly. Thus, it is not a reflexive tool for most graduate students to consider. It leaves them unknowing, impeding their opportunities to make more conscious and informed decisions regarding their presentation of self. This results in complex challenges for individuals navigating multiple audiences because of the accessible aspects of SNSs (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013), which is evident in the experiences and perceptions of graduate students. Squirrell (n.d.) highlights that while presenting oneself to others, an individual may tend to accentuate aspects of their performance that highlight their socially accredited and conventionally accepted behaviours and identifiers. For graduate students, the line

between upholding an accepted academic reputation (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Kozinsky, 2017; Perna, 2021) on SNSs and using the same social networks in a personal manner, often becomes blurred (boyd, 2013) if not for deliberately distinct digital identities. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) ties into academic identity or academic self-concept, as it provides insight as to how and why graduate students may tend to think of themselves as individuals distinct from their academic identity or group members belonging to their institution, while also considering the consequences of personal and social identities for individual perceptions and group behaviour.

It is also important to consider generational perceptions and practices as a significant aspect and factor in how graduate students navigate SNSs. SNSs became the phenomenon of the Millennial and Generation Z (Gen Z) era, as their existence and popularity have evolved over the last few decades (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Jacobsen & Forse, 2011; Dijck, 2013; Green et al., 2020). SNSs have been promptly embraced and universally accepted by individuals of the digital knowledge time (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Bozkurt, 2014). Individuals began utilizing SNSs for various and complex purposes in a broad manner, such as communication needs or for social learning environments (Bozkurt & Tu, 2016). Many individuals use their generational perceptions and experiences as an identifier when it comes to their practices and navigation of SNSs (Davis, 2016; Bozkurt & Tu, 2016; Metcalfe, 2018), as it is common amongst the eras to assume generations prior to Millennials do not hold the same knowledge regarding SNSs as younger generations may.

The Millennial generation, consisting of individuals born between 1981 and 1996 and belonging to the demographic cohort born subsequent to Generation X, has a unique experience with SNSs and the navigation of digital identity performativity. Millennials precede the Gen Z

generation, born between 1997 to 2012, who also have a unique experience with SNSs and navigations of digital identity performativity. Millennials and Gen Z grew up alongside ubiquitous technology and held onto idealized perceptions of pursuing education and careers stemming from higher education (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Perna, 2021). There is an educational pressure, unlike those that earlier generations have experienced (Kozinsky, 2017), with an added obstacle to navigating and presenting one's digital identity across contemporary SNSs.

These generations, exploring and navigating SNSs, face both the educational pressures of presenting professional, institutionally accepted (Howard, 2003; Winter, 2009) digital identities while still using the same platforms for personal use, where they ordinarily assimilate digital norms of the platform and digital community into their expression of self (Davis, 2016). The complex contrast leads graduate students to experience context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013) as they try to remain professional and presentable while still garnering engagement and techno-cultural appeal to fellow SNS users.

By exploring the navigation of digital identity by graduate students who fall into the Millennial and Gen Z generations and are currently pursuing higher education, it is possible to examine and convey the postulated ways of digital identity performativity. This research can help graduate students form better-informed navigation of their digital identity in terms of context collapse between their scholarly online behaviour and their personal use of SNSs. As technology continues to advance, there is an opportunity to investigate the navigation of digital identity as it occurs on SNSs for individuals very much involved in both physical and digital spaces, more specifically, for graduate students belonging to higher education institutions and engaging on SNSs.

## Research Statement

Identity is fluid and dynamic (Winter, 2009; Cover, 2015), meaning most individuals have various perceptions and experiences that influence how they navigate their digital identity on SNSs in the digital environment. There has been rapid adoption of SNSs into social engagement (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Jacobsen & Forse, 2011; Dijck, 2013; Green et al., 2020), yet explorations and inquiries into how this shift has altered perceptions are rare. When technology integration into society and social relationships is discussed, the focus is mainly on the implications raised by privacy and data issues (Lyon, Haggerty, & Ball, 2012; Selwyn, 2014; Salman, 2015; Becker Marciano, 2018). Academic literature and research studies explore the implications of technology and social media in education to an extent (Wang et al., 2011; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; Tess, 2013; Salman, 2015; Burbules, 2016; Green et al., 2020). However, there is a narrow focus on the navigational decisions made by graduate students who use SNSs to construct and present digital identities based on influences caused by their perceptions and experiences.

This issue necessitates scholarly attention because there is a permanence to online behaviours and digital identities (Kane, 2015; Cover, 2015). Therefore, the research problem stemming from this study concerns how digital identity navigation by graduate students is not often investigated in the context of the phenomenon of performativity within higher education. How individuals perform themselves can be rewarding from a networking perspective but may also pose risks and challenges when considering that reputation may be based on one click or profile visit (Kerr & Barrigar, 2012; Boté, 2018). SNSs are a double-edged sword as they may polarize users (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013) between their academic-based offline identity and digital identity portrayed online. When navigating SNSs as emerging scholars and



for personal expression, perceptions and experiences influence how individuals navigate their digital identity, thus resulting in their digital identity being a performative act of self-representation in the digital environment. However, the conversation on the phenomena of performativity needs more engagement at a higher education level (Salman, 2015).

Since humans base their conscious perspectives on subconscious perceptions stemming from beliefs, perception of reality controls perspectives (Moore, 2016), and perspectives influence our approaches and actions. In reference to this thesis, this study investigates how graduate students' lived experiences and perceptions influence their navigational approaches to presenting their digital identity and, thus, how those navigational approaches contribute to the phenomenon of performativity in the context of higher education.

According to Stuart (2021), performativity is an expression that occurs when individuals' deep intentions create and push forward exchanges between themselves and their spectators. Similarly, Schechner (n.d) states:

“Performance is a broad spectrum of actions ranging from play, games, popular entertainments, and rituals to the performing arts, professional roles, political personae, media, and the constructions of race, gender, and identity in everyday life”.

Performativity in digital identity navigation is a contemporary emerging phenomenon in higher education for graduate students of the last few generations, as SNSs have gained popularity over recent decades (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Jacobsen & Forse, 2011; Dijck, 2013; Bozkurt, 2014; Green et al., 2020). In this sense, graduate students navigate their expressed intentions on SNSs to create and push forward navigational exchanges between themselves and their spectators (Stuart, 2021): the viewers of their SNS profiles.

While the topic of digital identity navigation does not pertain directly to curricula, when positioned in the context of graduate students performing their digital identities in alignment with scholarly online behaviour, personal behaviour, or behaviour comprised of the two, it does concern the assumptions and expectations for graduate students not formally communicated (Salman, 2015) through the social imaginary and hidden curriculum of higher education institutions and SNSs. The social imaginary is a “set of values, institutions, laws, and symbols through which people imagine their social whole” (Sartre, 1972). The inclusion of digital identity navigation on SNSs in the experiences of graduate students poses a critical change in the social imaginary of higher education institutions, as these institutions hold a history of representing an academic prestige economy comprised of specific cultural, social, and symbolic values, levels of status, and behaviours expected of students (Bourdieu, 1984; Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). Similarly, the hidden curriculum, identified in 1968 by Philip Jackson, refers to the unofficial and implicit norms, behaviours, and values circulating the school culture and ethos (Jackson, 1968; Giroux & Penna, 1979; International Bureau of Education, 2016). Contrary to an official curriculum, which explicitly conveys learning outcomes and goals, the hidden curriculum is comprised of behaviours, norms, values, and implicit understandings that are not explicitly taught but rather obtained through lengthy exposure to the culture of a particular institution, department, or field in academia (Desai, Hoffman, & Zibton, n.d). The hidden curriculum posits the covert socialization pattern (Giroux & Penna, 1979) within the broad social and cultural environment of society as a whole (International Bureau of Education, 2016).

As this thesis studies social practices with social consequences and potential implications, this study will support graduate students by acknowledging the social imaginary and hidden curriculum issues of digital identity navigation in higher education. Alsubaie (2015)

acknowledges that many hidden curricular concerns emanate from assumptions and expectations not formally communicated, set up, or conveyed within the learning environment, which is in alignment with Jackson's (1968) and Sartre's (1972) concepts of the hidden curriculum and the social imaginary.

I argue the lack of overt acknowledgement and discussion regarding the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968) and the social imaginary (Sartre, 1972) of higher education institutions poses significant implications for graduate students of the digital era. These decade-old concepts represent unspoken "rules" and norms that graduate students must decipher and adhere to for success in their academic institutions (Jackson, 1968; Sartre, 1972). The hidden curriculum and social imaginary of graduate students are explained by Calarco (2020), who states the ways of doing - such as how to do, write, and talk about research, navigate complex bureaucracies, and how to ask others for help when feeling lost - are ways of doing that are seldomly explained directly. They are hidden through implicit behaviours, norms, values, and understandings (Desai, Hoffman, & Zibton, n.d) that contextually fit into the society and culture within which the graduate school is positioned (Davis, 2016) and are not overtly discussed within the regular curricula of higher education. The hiddenness perpetuates inequalities in graduate school and the academic sector as a whole, especially for marginalized students who are disadvantaged by this hiddenness. Critical exploration into the hidden curriculum and social imaginary of higher education institutions exposes a disparaging difference in opportunities for graduate students in privileged, unmarginalized groups versus those in marginalized groups because privileged graduate students have a distinctly easier time navigating the hidden curriculum of graduate school due to supports and access to resources (Calarco, 2020). For example, marginalized groups, such as first-generation or international graduate students, may

have an increasingly more difficult time navigating the hidden curriculum as they may be unfamiliar with their higher education institution's culture, language, and implicit societal and social expectations.

The hidden curriculum and social imaginary pose even more implications for graduate students in the digital age. The introduction and incorporation of SNSs in the graduate school experience add another complex navigation layer for students. They are not just navigating the implicit behaviours, norms, values, and understandings of graduate school (Desai, Hoffman, & Zibton, n.d); they are also now navigating the implicit behaviours, norms, values, and understandings of SNSs when constructing and presenting their digital identities. The combination of these navigations results in performativity by graduate students, a phenomenon that may be positioned as context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013), as graduate students must navigate these indirect expectations as SNS users that access and operate the platforms as both emerging scholars and for personal expression. The context collapse may contribute significantly to outdated and potentially problematic expectations and ideals for graduate students that need to consider the nuances of the contemporary digital age. For example, institutions holding ideals for graduate students to participate in academic or professional culture primarily do not consider how graduate students can use their digital identity to contribute to both academic culture and personal expression in one form of self-representation on SNSs. Therefore, I argue the lack of open discussion may lead graduate students to feel ill-prepared when deciding how to navigate their digital identity because of the implicit emphasis placed on upholding their academic reputation as emerging scholars (Jackson, 1968; Sartre, 1972; Giroux & Penna, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984) while also fitting into communities on SNSs during personal expression.

Thus, the inspiration for this thesis stems from my belief that since various individuals have various perceptions and experiences that influence the navigation of their digital identity, exploring these differing perceptions and experiences can provide adequate representation in acknowledging the phenomenon of performativity. With this thesis, I aim for the data to provide insight into how current graduate students navigate their identity in the digital environment through the exploration into how graduate students genuinely perceive and experience their digital identity by exploring the choices they make, highlighting the phenomenon of performativity.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how higher education scholars at a graduate level perceive and experience their navigation of digital identity on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression, in the context of performativity. The phenomenon of performativity, stemming from Erving Goffman's (1959) performative theory, is ever-present for graduate students as they navigate "context collapse" (boyd, 2013) between academic identity and personal identity on SNSs. SNSs collapse various audiences into single contexts, making it complicated for individuals to use the same techniques online to manage multiplicity in offline interactions (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013). This thesis will investigate how different graduate students navigate perceive and experience their navigation of digital identity on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression in the same digital environment spaces as a way to bring attention to the phenomenon of performativity. This research will also contribute to the conversation on digital identity navigation and the phenomenon of performativity at a higher education level.

### **Research Question**

This study aims to investigate how higher education scholars at a graduate level perceive and experience their navigation of digital identity on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression, in the context of performativity, using Goffman's (1959) performative theory to address the phenomenon of performativity. The main question guiding this research is: How do graduate students pursuing higher education use their perceptions and experiences to navigate their digital identity on SNSs in relation to being both emerging scholars and social network participants?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework guiding this study is a paradigmatic interpretive method using constructivism theory. According to Brau (2018), constructivism has two forms: radical (cognitive) and social. Radical (cognitive) constructivism, developed by Jean Piaget, concerns constructing knowledge dependent on the individual's subjective interpretation of their active experience (Piaget, 1971; Brau, 2018). Social constructivism, developed by Lev Semenovič Vygotsky, proclaims that human development is socially situated, so knowledge is constructed through interaction with other individuals (Vygotsky & Cole, 1981; Brau, 2018). This thesis uses the paradigmatic interpretive method of both constructivism theory forms to generate an understanding of the lived experiences, emotions, feelings, and perceptions of participants (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) regarding their digital identity navigation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), Morgan (2007), Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), and Farrow et al. (2020), interpretivism displays the following characteristics:

- The admission that the social world cannot be understood from the standpoint of an individual;
- The belief that realities are multiple and socially constructed;

- The acceptance that there is inevitable interaction between the researcher and his or her research participants;
- The acceptance that context is vital for knowledge and knowing;
- The belief that knowledge is created by the findings, can be value laden and the values need to be made explicit;
- The need to understand the individual rather than universal laws;
- The belief that causes and effects are mutually interdependent;
- The belief that contextual factors need to be taken into consideration in any systematic pursuit of understanding.

Additionally, this thesis highlights an element of critical theory to touch on the dominant social norms in higher education, specifically for graduate students. Critical theory stems from theorist Max Horkheimer, who defined the term in 1937 as a social theory intended to critique the social structure of society (Horkheimer, 1972) through the explanation and transformation of “different dimensions of the domination of human beings in modern societies” (Moisio, 2013, p. 559). Using critical theory in this thesis allows for a practical framework to develop “a qualitative critique of social media platforms, in extension to the large body of work that addresses the quantitatively measurable effects of the platforms” (Becker Marciano, 2018). Critical theory is also used to concentrate on this study's reflective nature, showing the communication of dominant social structures to critique the context collapse of digital identity navigation (Goffman, 1959; Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1975; boyd, 2013). Winter (2009) acknowledges the roles of value and identity in higher education institutions, stating that “values such as collegial governance, institutional autonomy and academic freedom have a long tradition of defining the essential elements of academic and university identities” (p. 122).

This research will investigate the experiences, perceptions, emotions, understandings, values, feelings, subjectivities, socio-cultural factors, and other meaningful aspects (Farrow et al., 2020) of graduate students in higher education to generate understanding and investigate the navigation of digital identity as a performative phenomenon in graduate students. It will bring together various perceptions and experiences of graduate students via the scroll-back method (Robards & Lincoln, 2019) and semi-structured interviews to develop an overall recognition of digital identity performativity through phenomenography.

Furthermore, I have direct experiential knowledge as a graduate student who navigates SNSs as both an emerging scholar and a networked participant. However, in my position, I use SNSs for more personal use and expression than for any academic engagement. I recognize that my perceptions and experiences on SNSs cause me to navigate my digital identity performatively, as I am careful and considerate about who, what, and how I post online. I recognize that this deliberate act of impression management and audience segregation stems from a lack of deep discussion regarding digital identity navigation. From my perspective, I err on the side of caution so as not to misrepresent myself and the social groups I am part of, such as my academic institution, friends, and familial connections. I felt as if my only navigational option when beginning graduate school was to differentiate my personal and academic identities in digital environments as a form of professional and academic reputation protection as well as being able to maintain a level of openness and personability online.

Considering my experiential knowledge, there is an implication that I become an "insider" (Chavez, 2008; Huff, 2009; Fleming, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018) as I collaborate and spend time in the field with participants. However, according to Chavez (2008), there is a false dichotomy concerning the debate on insider/outsider positionality. My role as an



insider researcher may serve a greater purpose in this research as I can better understand the perceptions and experiences of other graduate students on an empathetic level. It may also benefit the ease of information transfer during the interview portion of the data collection as my direct experiential knowledge may ease participants when recounting their perspectives and experiences.

### **Significance of the Study**

This topic is important to study as digital environment integration with academic endeavours continues to ramp up during the twenty-first century for graduate students (Salman, 2015; Davis, 2016; Boté, 2018). Additionally, there is currently not enough open discussion about how the perceptions and experiences of graduate students influence their navigational approach to digital identity in academic literature, as most discourse on the topic is directed toward privacy and data concerns (Lyon, Haggerty, & Ball, 2012; Selwyn, 2014; Salman, 2015; Becker Marcano, 2018).

For graduate students, the line between upholding a conventionally accepted academic reputation on SNSs and using the same social networks in a personal manner often becomes blurred if not for the distinct separation of digital identities (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013). This navigation can become quite complicated, as we currently have little understanding of the individual factors that influence the decision to separate digital identities, from appeasing one target audience to engage in impression management (Goffman, 1959), to remaining neutral to either. Explicitly, the role of graduate students needs significant attention as the ubiquity of technology and the SNSs that may be accessed from those technologies blur the line between offline academic communities and interactions (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013) and those which take place in digital spaces (Salman, 2015; Boté, 2018).

Additionally, the graduate student identity is transitional, as they navigate their new roles and requirements of now belonging to the graduate student community. According to a blog post by GradProSkills (2019), it is normal for graduate students to feel alone and isolated for various reasons:

- “Fewer courses means less opportunities to meet people and non-overlapping schedules
- Other external obligations may come into play, such as work, family, etc.
- Specialization in a field can lead to a sense of over-immersion and restriction in your topic
- A lot of projects at the graduate level require individual work”.

Due to the transitional identity of graduate students resulting in a unfamiliar and oftentimes isolating experience, I argue that specifically studying the perceptions and experiences of graduate students is a significant area of study.

By investigating the perceptions and experiences of graduate students who use SNSs to construct and present digital identities, this research will provide helpful insight for the educational community. Additionally, acknowledging this research as significant allows the dissemination of knowledge for individuals both inside and outside academia, as various individuals, regardless of education level, use SNSs and make navigational decisions about their digital identity (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Jacobsen & Forse, 2011; Dijck, 2013; Green et al., 2020). It may also provide discussion and guidance for future generations of those who will grow up alongside this phenomenon but have not yet decided on pursuing higher education.

In particular, graduate students can benefit from this developing discussion. This research study will investigate the influential factors alongside social consequences and implications of

digital identity navigation, helping bring mindfulness to the social perceptions and experiences they engage in as scholars in higher education institutions and as participants in SNSs. Therefore, this thesis will encourage reputation analysis for graduate students in a digital context to address digital identity navigation in the context of the phenomenon of performativity.

### **Locating Myself in the Study**

I identify as a white female Master of Education (M. Ed.) student in my early twenties. Born in 1998, I have had a unique opportunity to grow alongside SNSs. I have primarily used Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter since as early as 2010, mainly for personal use.

Since the beginning of my M. Ed. program, I have tried reputation management while navigating digital identity by keeping scholarly online behaviour that aligns with academic identity and simultaneously using the same SNSs for personal digital expression. Due to this, I have developed an interest in digital technology's impact on education and digital pedagogy. The concept of addressing digital identity in a performative manner that graduate students navigate based on the influence of perceptions and experiences appeared through my perceptions and carefully curated experiences of displaying a digital identity that falls somewhere between a scholarly online presence and a personal digital presence.

My experiential knowledge as a current young female graduate student pursuing a career in academia and growing up alongside the emergence of SNSs has led to an interesting relationship with my approach to constructing and presenting myself across SNSs. I often make the conscious decision to use aliases on the networks, keep my profiles private, and intricately choose who can publicly view certain aspects of my profiles to ensure that my identity existing on these networks is still carefully curated for viewers who may belong to the same higher

education institution I belong to and the educational communities I wish to join in the future of my career.

I have two public Twitter profiles, and one with no identifying information. I use the platform on this account to engage with memes, politics, and current events to varying degrees. I often find myself exploring hashtags and niche communities within the network, such as #OntEd or #OntPoli, to observe what others discuss on Twitter regarding Ontario's educational sector or politics. However, I actively avoid engaging with any of these tweets besides "liking" them. I will retweet tweets and follow Twitter profiles not affiliated with education or politics if I find them humorous or entertaining. However, I refrain from following anyone who academically uses the SNS. Of the 40 profiles I follow on Twitter using my main public account, all are individuals I know, and my 400+ followers consist of a mix of people who know me in real life as well as people who do not know that I am behind that profile.

I also created a separate public Twitter profile as a secondary account. This account includes identifying information such as my name, images of myself, and connections to my academics, such as my roles in my institution. This Twitter profile was created to connect with the academic Twitter community and at the request of the University of Windsor's Research Ethics Board (REB) to post my call for participants (see APPENDIX D). This account has no ties to my other public Twitter account and is geared toward a more formal, professional, and academic identity.

For Instagram, I have one private profile and one public profile. The private account encapsulates a visual representation of my life. I post images identifying myself and my friends, pinpoint my location, and highlight my interests, hobbies, and events. To express this level of transparency with my followers, I keep my profile private rather than public since I feel some

images do not accurately represent my academic identity and reputation. I use this space to personally express my life rather than adhere to the academic and professional identity I uphold when connected to co-workers, peers, and my higher education institution. I engage with posts from accounts I do not personally know that highlight art, self-care and mindfulness, memes and humour, and recipes by liking, commenting, and saving posts. As I only follow and engage with individuals I know personally, such as friends and family or acquaintances, I only follow around 100 profiles. With nearly 1000 followers on Instagram, most of these individuals know me personally or through other people but remain outside of the academic community, which I also belong to. By having a private profile, I can screen new follow requests and decide whether to accept an individual as a new follower, but I cannot control how people who already have access to my profile through following me perceive my digital identity.

I have also created a more academic identity-focused Instagram account, which is public and searchable, to connect with fellow peers and my campus community, and at the request of the University of Windsor's REB, to post my call for participants (see APPENDIX D). This public Instagram account has identifying photographs of myself, my current work projects and job titles, and my full name.

When faced with making decisions based on how to navigate SNSs as an emerging scholar but also for personal expression, I recognized that the performative ways I navigate digital identity were just that – performative. In some cases, I lean more towards a polished academic presence online by ensuring my Instagram profile remains private from fellow academic institution members. I keep a public Twitter profile but ensure no identifying markers such as full name, location, or images that could tie me to the profile. These decisions are influenced by my perceptions and experiences regarding digital identity and how others may

perceive it, thus resulting in the navigation of my digital identity as a graduate student being highly performative for specific audiences on specific platforms. I am highly conscious of both the benefits of networking and connection that SNSs have, as well as the risks to reputation and professional advancement they possess.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Concerning my philosophical assumptions, they correlate to my choice of qualitative research methodology for this research study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that qualitative research is interpretive, humanistic, and naturalistic, focusing on subjectivity. My ontological assumption about the navigational aspects of digital identity navigation as a graduate student is that the phenomenon encompasses multiple actualities, many of which individuals engaging in the phenomena do not consciously recognize. My epistemological assumption is that qualitative research will allow an opportunity to investigate participants' lived experiences and perceptions to explore the conceptualization of digital identity through graduate students' perceptions and experiences. My axiological assumption is that this study will reflect ethical values, exploring how individuals' perceptions and experiences, combined with social factors and norms in various contexts, cause them to behave and engage in a particular digital way of performativity as they navigate their digital identity. Moreover, my methodological assumption is that qualitative research will construct meaning for digital identity navigation stemming from the exploration of ideas, philosophies, and lived experiences of participants, thus bringing attention to the phenomenon of performativity.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Based on the review of this research study, there are three limitations to address—the first concerns phenomenography studies, which focus on hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is

complicated because examining and interpreting the accumulated data may be difficult to pose as credible, reliable, and practical unless adequate supporting components receive inclusion (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since hermeneutics represents the interpretive epistemological and ontological nature of phenomenographic studies, my role as the researcher is to deeply analyze the data for patterns of variation in experiences and perceptions (Marton, 1981).

Hermeneutics ties into the second limitation, the results section. Due to the open-ended semi-structured interviews prompting participants' experiences and perceptions, the results are exclusively interpretive due to the phenomenographic data analysis procedure. The phenomenographic data analysis uses the creation of 'categories of description' (Marton, 1981) to focus on variations of experience rather than variations of individual participants.

The third limitation involves the number of participants, as phenomenographic research requires data from three to ten participants. This sample size is not large and, therefore, only reflects the variations of experience and perceptions from a small group of participants.

Regarding delimitations, the first refers to the area of study. This research study is confined to participants from Ontario, Canada. Secondly, the participants in the study are a delimitation because the participants must be graduate students rather than undergraduate students. The third delimitation concerns only analyzing Twitter and Instagram SNSs as opposed to including other SNSs such as Facebook, Snapchat, or TikTok for analysis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Before diving into how graduate students' perceptions and experiences influence their navigation of digital identity, this chapter must address terms such as the phenomenon of performativity, techno-culture, SNSs, and digital identity. In doing so, I can position the terms in concepts such as the attention economy and SNSs in higher education.

According to Davis (2012), the socially embedded nature of identity has a long history of recognition, such as how Goffman (1959) describes the self as a creation of social interactions. An individual's identity, whether occurring online or offline, is a social construction, also referred to as a performance of oneself, based on the social norms and expectations in the environment. This act can become complex when navigating identity in a digital environment such as an SNS while possessing an academic identity that connects the student to their institution (Winter, 2009; Salman, 2015; Boté, 2018).

Academic literature and studies on SNSs in education have been increasing over recent decades as the popularity of SNSs has grown. However, there is a gap in the literature surrounding digital identity and performativity in higher education (Salman, 2015; Becker Marciano, 2018), especially among graduate students. The social practices and perceptions of graduate students as they navigate their digital identity on SNSs is a rich area that this study aims to contribute to.

#### **Performativity**

Performativity occurs when an individual performing through the presentation of themselves uses various actions, such as impression management and making conscious



decisions, to construct an image of their identity they want viewers to perceive (Goffman, 1959). Goffman (1959) states that performativity transpires through influencing the definition of the situation by the expression of self, guiding viewers to act voluntarily with the presented performance of the said individual. According to Butler (1990), performativity is not an act but rather an action in which humans exist in a performative world.

Performativity, used within this paper, refers to how graduate students construct and display their digital identities on SNSs. This thesis claims that digital identity navigation is a phenomenon of performativity that many graduate students encounter as they navigate SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression. In this study, I argue that digital identity navigation serves as a performative expression of self, as graduate students consider their perceptions, experiences, and how viewers – whether belonging to their academic institution or their personal social networks – perceive their projected digital identity.

Goffman (1959) uses dramaturgy, a sociological perspective of identity, that utilizes theatrical metaphors to analyze identity formation and presentation (Media Texthack Team, 2014). The ultimate goal of a dramaturgical performance of self is the same whether it occurs online or offline: to project a desired perception of self to an audience while maintaining the dramatic portrayal in a consistent manner (Media Texthack Team, 2014).

The concept of the dramaturgical perspective acknowledges that identities are pluralistic and applies to how graduate students quickly shift and manage performative presentations as they navigate the different social contexts of being emerging scholars and SNS users for personal expression (Goffman, 1959; Media Texthack Team, 2014). Goffman's theory sees “social life primarily as a function of interactions between people, groups, and institutions in particular

contexts, and emphasizes the importance of symbols such as language, gestures, appearance" (Squirrell, n.d., para. 1).

Goffman (1959) highlights two significant aspects of dramaturgy: front-stage and back-stage performances. Front-stage – also referred to as ‘face-work’ – allows for an individual to set the tone of how their identity will be projected, such as the environment where it takes place (setting), their fixed characteristics that may be physically observed (appearance), and their transient relation to the social context they are engaging in (manner) (Goffman, 1959). Examples of front-stage in connection to digital identity for graduate students can be thought of as the SNS of an individual’s choosing (setting), their age, gender, race, or clothing they wear in their SNS posts (appearance), and an individual’s approach to their self-presentation through attitude, demeanour, interactions (manner). Back-stage, however, refers to the behaviours that occur when an individual is not performing for any observers, where they are free from societal or cultural norms or expectations (Goffman, 1959). In the context of digital identity navigation, back-stage can refer to the use of private profiles over public or refraining from controversial topics.

However, Goffman (1959) explores the use of impression management and audience segregation by individuals when attempting to control the portrayed information by presenting oneself. According to Goffman (1959), an individual must "act with expressive responsibility" (p. 132), as many unintentional, inappropriate impressions may occur that discredit or weaken the individual's expression of self. These 'faux pas' moments frequently occur through intentional communication and interaction and jeopardize destroying the intentional performance or image presented by the individual (Goffman, 1959). Goffman uses the term "impression management" to refer to the idea that through actions, behaviours, and appearance, or what we do and do not do, we embrace the ability to influence the audience of our sincerity, authority, and supposed

attributes belonging to the role we are performing (Squirrell, n.d). Impression management is a helpful way of navigating one's digital identity and, thus, the phenomenon of performativity. It helps individuals avoid the tension and stigma associated with presenting themselves as unidealized and non-normative member of the SNS (Goffman, 1959). According to Squirrell (n.d.), individuals "engage in impression management, trying to project an idealized image of ourselves through the aforementioned control" (para. 6).

Audience segregation also serves as a beneficial tool in navigating digital identity, as it helps individuals perform specific facets of their identity to specific groups of observers (Goffman, 1959). In reference to Goffman's theory, the segregation of audiences indicates that individuals put on different performances or emphasize other aspects of their performance for different sets of people (Squirrell, n.d.). These navigational approaches, situated in Goffman's (1959) performative theory, help SNS users manage the continuous surveillance implications of public SNS profiles as users internalize and incorporate what is or is not acceptable to express outwardly (Balick, 2023) for their digital identity, based upon the implicit social norms of the platform they are using.

The Internet blurs the distinction between front-stage and back-stage, allowing individuals to engage simultaneously in both front- and back-stage instead of concurrent expression (Media Texthack Team, 2014). Squirrell (n.d.) states that self-presentation is an individual's actions in social instances being 'acts,' where they put on a 'front' to project their desired image of themselves to their audience, whomever it is may be. Once the front is created, it is supported by manipulating the environment where the performance occurs, their appearance, and how the individual presents themselves (Squirrell, n.d.). This concept ties into this research study as this thesis claims graduate students project their 'front' through the presentation of their

digital identity, then manipulate the content they post and engage with on the SNS of their choosing, thus resulting in ‘acts.’

This thesis investigates how higher education scholars at a graduate level perceive and experience their navigation of digital identity on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression, in the context of performativity. Additionally, using social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) and which focuses on the interactions between personal and social identities, can call attention to the reasoning behind navigational decisions made by graduate students as they attempt to curate and manage their digital identities.

The interactions overtly and covertly expected (Jackson, 1968; Sartre, 1972; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Alsubaie, 2015) of graduate students in an academic setting versus the interactions and connections commonplace on SNSs like Twitter and Instagram take up differing performative subject positions as exhibitions of digital identity. According to boyd (2001), individuals only present particular facets of their internal identity for consideration to viewers through self-monitoring. It manages what is seen and deemed acceptable for the environment they express and present themselves in. This approach creates a social performance where the individual offers varying presentations of self in accordance with their different facets of identity while managing the impressions that observers may perceive to convey a digital identity that is in alignment with the appropriate information at the appropriate time (boyd, 2001).

Graduate students’ perceptions and experiences influencing their navigation of digital identities between scholarly online behaviour and using the same SNSs for personal use can vary immensely. According to Goffman (1959), individuals may sometimes act in a calculating manner to present themselves in a way that directly gives the kind of impression that is likely to evoke the type of response the individual is attempting to obtain from their observers. Goffman

(1959) also recognizes that individuals perform calculated activities in some situations without consciousness as to why. Furthermore, Goffman (1959) states that in some cases, even individuals who are intentionally and consciously presenting themselves do so primarily due to the tradition of their group or social status requiring it and “not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression” (Goffman, 1959, p. 3). These declarations tie into this research as some graduate students may present their digital identity from a scholarly online presence approach. In contrast, other graduate students may curate their digital identities to reflect a more personal and less academic representation of themselves on SNSs. Regardless of the perceptions and experiences, digital identities fall between the two extremities, thus creating a need for exploration into the navigation of digital identities to encourage discussion and understanding of the phenomenon in higher institutions.

### **Techno-Culture**

Penley and Ross (1991) familiarize the term ‘techno-culture’, acknowledging it pertains to relations between technology and culture. Shaw (2008) refers to techno-culture as “the relationship between technology and culture and the expression of that relationship in patterns of social life, economic structures, politics, art, literature and popular culture” (p. 4). Kozinets’ (2019) definition of techno-culture is in alignment with this, positioning the term as “the various identities, practices, values, rituals, hierarchies, and other sources and structures of meanings that are influenced, created by, or expressed through technology consumption” (p. 621). When discussing techno-culture, Shaw (2008) emphasizes the transformations caused by technology, such as changes in work and social relations, to more fundamental assumptions like existing as a human in the digital age. Allmer (2014) posits the connection between society and technology by

recognizing how society shapes and constructs technology and how technology then transforms and impacts society, a cycle that continuously repeats with the ubiquitous adoption of SNSs.

Linturi (2000) acknowledges how technology is capable of affecting value systems, power structures, routines, and environments for individuals. This research focuses on the relationship between technology (digital identity and SNSs) and the performative aspect of navigating one's digital identity (referring to the sociological notions about the structure, culture, norms, and practices when navigation occurs). Furthermore, approaching techno-culture as a socio-material perception grounded in relational ontology helps to strengthen the epistemological practices in this research (Hultin, 2019).

Relating to this research, performative humans exist in this techno-culture world through SNSs as they perform their digital identities through navigation that is influenced by perceptions and experiences. Graduate students belong to both an academic culture due to their institutional affiliation and socio-culture when using the sites for personal expression and navigating their digital identities accordingly.

However, as Goffman (1959) proclaims, society is organized on individuals possessing specific social characteristics having moral rights to expect the value and respect of observers treating them in the correspondingly appropriate way of said characteristics. Individuals who implicitly or explicitly signify their specific social characteristics through a performance of identity expect the performed and claimed self to be honoured and valued by observers (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, "when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect" (Goffman, 1959, p. 6).

## Social Networking Sites

boyd and Ellison (2008) define SNSs as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). Gillespie (2019) states that SNS's creation, popularity, and adoptability arose from promises of the Internet extending participation, expression, and connection. With the growth of SNSs, such as Twitter and Instagram, comes the growth of more public discourse, cultural production, social interactions, and individual expression moving online into the digital environment (Gillespie, 2019). Wang et al. (2011) believe that as SNSs continue to grow in popularity amongst users, technology serves as a vital part of student's lives.

In this research, I focus on the SNSs Twitter and Instagram because, in my experience, these sites are commonly used by both emerging academics and for personal use. As Stewart (2015) states, the scholarly use of online networks and sites continues to grow, encouraging new avenues for scholarly connection and communication. However, these opportunities for scholarly online presence coincide on the same networks where graduate students may want to express their individualistic identities as opposed to their academic ones, resulting in context collapse ((Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013).

In 2006, Twitter started as a microblogging SNS to promote user connectedness (Dijck, 2013). According to the Twitter Help Centre (n.d.), "Twitter is a service for friends, family, and coworkers to communicate and stay connected by exchanging quick, frequent messages. People post Tweets containing photos, videos, links, and text. These messages are posted to your profile, sent to your followers, and are searchable on Twitter search" (para. 1). However, throughout

Twitter's existence, the SNS moved from serving as an autonomous utility service to users for connectedness to a more extensive information networking company (Dijck, 2013).

Instagram started in 2010 as a "free photo and video sharing app available on iPhone and Android. People can upload photos or videos to our service and share them with their followers or with a select group of friends. They can also view, comment and like posts shared by their friends on Instagram" (Instagram Help Centre, n.d.). According to Murfianti (2017), individuals use the SNS in attempts to broadcast their self-presentation through posted images, engaging in impression management and self-representation to achieve communication of the expected self-image.

Veletsianos and Kimmons (2012) state that academia regularly is "ever-changing in response to both internal and external stimuli, including technological innovations and dominant cultural value" (p. 773), which is reflected in our era of ubiquitous technology and SNSs permeating the academic community and higher education institutions. The research by Veletsianos and Kimmons (2012) sees faculty in higher education institutions experiencing difficulties in establishing personal and professional boundaries online. The authors reveal concerns about how online activity influences professional reputation and express a desire surrounding a more prominent ability to manage time and relationships through SNSs.

Concerning this research, the ease of academic and personal boundaries being blurred on SNSs is something that graduate students navigate; thus, it deserves more attention in scholarly literature and research studies. According to Goffman (1959), individuals may only sometimes successfully project their desired self-representation. Therefore, a more profound exploration into how digital identity navigation occurs may also provide insight into how the broadcasted



self-presentation may contradict, discredit, or place significant doubt (Goffman, 1959) upon the attempted projection.

## **Digital Identity**

Cover (2015) frames identity as conceptualizing the self in the context of exhibitions, self-representation, demarcations of identity classifications, linkages between self and behavioural characteristics, and ways of approaching and understanding "being" in our everyday lives (p. x-xi). This use of the term identity aligns with my constructionist-influenced approach to the study. Identity is often formulated from distinct categories shaped by cultural and social environments and influences surrounding the individual constructing their identity (Cover, 2015). In this thesis, I use this definition of identity in conjunction with Metcalfe (2019), who notes that when considering digital identity as one's character, it refers to an individual's self-portrayal online, as it is managed entirely by the individual who forms the online profiles through their discourse, activities, and self-descriptions.

The term digital identity stands for how an individual uses cultural and social environments and influences to shape their presence in a digital context (Cover, 2015). An individual may use significations of identity to construct profiles on non-physical digital spaces such as social media networking sites like Twitter or Instagram. Metcalfe (2019) highlights the variety in definitions for the term digital identity but frames digital identity as a combination of features and characteristics associated with a uniquely identifiable individual, collected, and confirmed in the digital sphere and used for intercommunications and representations online.

The projected digital identity is constructed to convey an individual's wishes on how they want to be perceived on digital networking sites. An issue with this is how others perceive us is subjective (Butler, 1990), despite efforts to curate our online identities. We attempt to compile

signifiers and identifiers that categorize us into the respective groups we strive to assimilate into by repeating and miming the norms, attributes, and codes of coherent behaviour that fabricate the idea that there is an inner essence (Butler, 1990). This thesis serves as an opportunity to display the navigational decisions of graduate students as they compile signifiers and identifiers and repeat the norms and covert expectations of their social and cultural groups (Jackson, 1968; Sartre, 1972; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Alsubaie, 2015) to create and present their digital identity. However, these projected digital identities are susceptible to context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013) and occur on public SNSs that pose opportunities for viewers to perceive graduate students' digital identities that may not be in alignment with how the individual wants to be perceived.

Acknowledging the pressures of opposing values between the SNSs and the higher education institutions to which graduate students belong allows for the opportunity to conduct necessary research, considering graduate students' first-hand experiences. Pasquini and Eaton (2021) recognize the many ways digital environments such as SNSs provide organizations and institutions with means for communication and information sharing while simultaneously acknowledging that "what is not fully explored are the potential challenges and risks professionals encounter as these social media ecologies and public, online environments occupy our work life" (p. 940). Concerning this research, graduate students face potential challenges and risks on academic, professional, and personal levels when context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013) occurs.

When these individuals belong to varying groups in their online and offline environments, the boundaries blur and cause context collapse (boyd, 2013). Therefore, this collapse may produce social consequences and implications if the phenomenon of performativity

is not acknowledged and better understood. This research study claims aspect of separating identities into compartmentalized and segmented beings performing for differing groups and settings becomes a phenomenon of performativity.

### **The Attention Economy**

The attention economy often refers to an individual's attention becoming a commodity in the digital age. Internet and media consumers have become so bombarded with information that it is difficult to hold their attention (Dyson, 2012; Joy, 2021). Dyson (2012) claims that “the attention economy is one in which people spend their time attracting others’ attention, whether by designing creative avatars, posting pithy comments, or accumulating ‘likes’ for their cat photos” (para. 13). Dyson (2012) explains that the online navigation of individuals often does not occur by those interested in purchasing anything, but rather, who use the networking sites for global news, entertainment, and to captivate the attention of others increasingly. According to Jones and Hafner (2021), individuals are subjected to high levels of social solicitations on SNSs, as they facilitate participation through the creation of new platforms to distribute attention.

On SNSs, it is possible for individuals to engage with a wide audience – often on a global scale – by publishing content of their own and engaging with the content of other SNS users (Jones & Hafner, 2021). This concept connects to the topic of this thesis as SNS users are creating content and enjoyment for one another (Dyson, 2012), therefore engaging in a performative act of self to draw in and maintain the attention of observers. Dyson (2012) claims that individuals are driven by the urge to spread their virtual identities, which the author associates with a desire not to be erased, and as an attempt at posterity.

### **SNSs in Higher Education**

Research by Tess (2013) examines the role of social networking in higher education courses, both real and virtual, in a comprehensive literature review. Research by Burbules (2016) investigates the effects of various SNSs on how people interact and the implications of these effects on the use of social media in an educational context. Green et al. (2020) examine the utilization of SNSs within university studies to support student success since "modern technology-rich environments provide a variety of tools with various types of capabilities that can support student success at the tertiary level" (p. 15). Wang et al. (2011) present research indicating that while most higher education students regularly use social media, especially spending numerous hours checking SNSs, there is a negative aspect to their use of social media. While these scholarly pieces of literature and research highlight the connection between SNSs and higher education, there is a gap in the literature that concerns a lack of focus on the perceptions and experiences that influence graduate students' digital identity navigation, specifically. Bennett and Folley (2014) argue that SNS tools provide doctoral students access to a community of other doctoral students and knowledgeable individuals. This connection reduces isolation and provides helpful opposition and support – namely Twitter's #phdchat, but also places the students in danger of using tools that result in exposure and risk in relation to managing their "hybridized identities" (Bennett & Folley, 2014). Another research study by Mahdiun (2020) focuses on the effect of social media on academic engagement and performance through the perspective of graduate students. However, it fails to acknowledge the performative lens for graduate students' digital identity that this research study utilizes. While these studies contribute to the gap in the literature on graduate students engaging in SNSs, there is no discussion regarding the influential factors of digital identity navigation positioned within the phenomenon of performativity.

Existing research does not explicitly investigate the experience and perceptions of graduate students as they navigate their digital identities. There is a lack of research focusing on graduate students when considering performativity in the digital environment. Therefore, this thesis aims to address these gaps in the academic literature by investigating graduate students' navigation of digital identity. This research specifically focuses on these variations through a performative lens, addressing the phenomenon of performativity as an occurring experience for graduate students. In doing so, this research aims to provide investigation into how the variation of digital identity navigation occurs within the experience of an individual graduate student in relation to the phenomenon of performativity.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

This research study uses qualitative research. Qualitative research follows the basic process of research, such as including an introduction, research questions, methods of data collection, and data analysis (Creswell, 2007), while representing “a legitimate mode of social and human science exploration, without apology or comparisons to quantitative research” (Creswell, 2007, p. 11). According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research methodology procedures are characterized as inductive, emerging, and shaped through the researcher’s experience during the data collection and analysis processes.

I chose to use qualitative research within this study as all qualitative research focuses on understanding the phenomenon being explored rather than focusing on aspects such as the reader of the study, the researcher, or the study’s participants (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research aligns with the goals of this thesis to investigate how different graduate students navigate varied ways of performing identity in the same digital environment spaces to bring attention to the phenomenon of performativity. Qualitative research allows me to acknowledge and gather information on the lived experiences and perceptions of graduate students as they navigate their digital identities.

I chose a phenomenographic approach for this study. Phenomenography examines “qualitatively diverse ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and various phenomena in the world around them” (Marton, 1986, p. 31). I chose to use phenomenography as a way to focus on addressing and describing the many ways

groups of individuals understand and experience a phenomenon (Marton, 1986; Ashworth & Lucas, 1998; Åkerlind, 2005; Green & Bowden, 2009). Ornek (2008) states there are many ways in which people experience or understand a given phenomenon because different people experience a phenomenon in diverse ways. According to Harris (2005), phenomenography helps make meaning for the various ways people experience their world, which can give beneficial and insightful awareness into the thoughts and behaviours of participants.

By conducting a developmental phenomenographic study, I look to discover people's multiple conceptions of the particular phenomenon of performativity (Harris, 2005) through a constructivist lens. Green and Bowden (2009) state that "pure phenomenography is driven primarily by curiosity, with the research outcomes being an end in themselves," while developmental phenomenography serves to address an issue (Green & Bowden, p. 52, 2009). With this research study, the issue necessitating addressing is the lack of overt conversations at the higher education level regarding graduate students' navigational approaches to digital identity. Therefore, I use phenomenography to investigate the phenomenon of performativity and address how graduate students navigate their digital identities in a performative manner through their detailed and descriptive perceptions and experiences. As Brew (p. 274, 2001) states:

“When we experience something, we differentiate the phenomenon from its context, noticing some things and not others. Some aspects are in the foreground and others recede to the background. Different people notice and interpret different things. What individuals are aware of is related to the meaning they attach to the phenomenon. However, when they share a common language and culture, there are relationships between all of the different ways of experiencing a particular phenomenon.”

Exploring the various ways of digital identity navigation (Marton, 1986; Ashworth & Lucas, 1998; Åkerlind, 2005; Green & Bowden, 2009) reveals shared relationships (Brew, 2001) stemming from influential factors, implications and opportunities stemming from navigational decisions, and conversations, or lack thereof, surrounding the phenomenon of performativity. Within these shared relationships, the phenomenon of performativity is identified through the variations of experiences (Marton, 1986) for graduate students.

### **My Role as the Researcher**

In qualitative research, reflexivity is a continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practice through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence their research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). As the researcher of this study, I must state my own reflexivity regarding my biases, values, and personal traits in areas such as socioeconomic status, gender, culture, and history that shape my interpretations of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I want participants to feel secure when sharing their personal experiences and perceptions about digital identity navigation, as I can empathize with other graduate students attempting to be both emerging scholars and maintain personal expression on SNSs. Therefore, expressing my reflexivity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022) with participants may help them feel more comfortable delving deeper into their perceptions and experiences with myself as the researcher. As a current graduate student and a user of SNSs, my interest in the phenomenon of performativity stems from my experiences and perceptions that influence my navigational decisions about my digital identity. Additionally, due to my background in communications and media studies, with a strong interest in sociology theories, theorists, and psychology, I am



interested in graduate students' experiences and perspectives during their digital identity navigation.

Acknowledging reflexivity in this research also allows me to examine my own beliefs, judgments, and practices before and during the research process to understand influences and my relationship to the research. Reflexivity allows me to acknowledge and advance the biases and values in the study by noting how my background shapes the direction of the study. My involvement in the research is essential as I must examine pre-existing literature and documents then collect data myself by interviewing participants and creating open-ended questions. However, in phenomenographic analysis, the researcher must suspend judgment and set aside pre-conceived ideas about the phenomenon (Harris, 2005) to allow the data to speak for itself during data collection. According to Chan et al. (2013), researchers must make efforts to set aside their beliefs, values, experiences, and repertoires of knowledge by bracketing – a term developed by Edmund Husserl, where researchers attempt to separate their personal biases as neutrally as possible to report the lived experiences of participants (Cossham, 2017). Therefore, after bracketing my pre-conceived ideas and the data analysis begins, my role as the researcher becomes more critical as I look for similarities and differences between sets of data to code themes and patterns.

For this study, in my role as the researcher, I observe the lived experiences of graduate students on Twitter and Instagram using the scroll-back method. This method of observation traditionally “is a qualitative research method that works within interviews whereby a researcher and participant ‘scroll back’ through the social media history of the participant” (Robards & Lincoln, 2020, p. 2). However, in this research study, the scroll-back method serves as a form of observation and data collection tool. In my approach, I receive the participant's SNS handles at

the time of their consent to participate in my research. Then, I select a few posts to address with the participant during the semi-structured interviews portion of the data collection. I can choose specific posts and content from participants' SNS profiles to address during the interviews.

Afterwards, I schedule semi-structured interviews with participants. My role as the researcher in this aspect of the study is to ask prompting questions to elicit detailed conversations (Creswell, 2007). In addition to asking prompting questions during the interview stage, I can ask participants about their decisions for specific posts to document and collect data from each participant. These observations and introspective questions posed during interviews can focus on how individuals navigate their digital identity on SNSs, factoring in what influences their decisions and their thought processes when engaging on SNSs that result in their overall navigational approaches.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), individuals develop various and multiple subjective meanings stemming from their experiences directed toward specific objects and things. I can investigate these experiences and focus on the complexities and variations of the perceptions and experiences. Based on such, my research goal is to rely on the participants' views and reflections on their perceptions and experiences being studied as much as possible. This goal will be achieved by asking participants broad and general questions during the semi-structured interviews to allow them to construct and relay their own meaning of their experiences and situations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As the researcher, I will present open-ended questioning, as Creswell and Creswell (2018) highlight the importance of listening carefully to participants as they express what they say or do in their life settings.

Once the data is collected, I examine the interview transcripts to discover and make meaning from relevant and recurring themes and patterns through data analysis. I work

"inductively, building patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 296) through inductive data analysis of participant interviews. This process allows me to describe a better understanding of the phenomenon of performativity in the context of digital identity navigation of SNSs from the perspective of my participants. Through a holistic account, I develop a complex picture of the phenomenon of performativity under study. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) note, "this involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges" (p. 296).

### **Research Framework**

*Table 1. Summary of Research Framework for this Study:*

<b>Ontology</b>	Social Constructivist
<b>Epistemology</b>	Interpretative (Hermeneutics)
<b>Methodology</b>	Qualitative, Phenomenography
<b>Methods</b>	1. Scroll-back Method 2. Semi-structured In-depth Interviews
<b>Approach</b>	Inductive
<b>Research Design</b>	Categories of Description

### **Research Design**

The phenomenographic study has Greek etymological roots (*phainomenon*, meaning 'appearance,' and *graphein*, meaning 'description' – meaning that phenomenography translates to a 'description of appearances' (Orgill, 2012). This thesis claims that a description of appearances concerns performativity, as self-presentation is essentially an act of appearance by an individual

to their audience. For graduate students navigating their digital identity, self-presentation occurs on SNSs. However, these platforms can collapse various audiences into single contexts (Marwick & boyd, 2011), making it difficult for graduate students to handle multiplicity in the digital environment.

According to Marton (1981), phenomenographic research aims to focus on the variations of experience as a way to learn about people's experiences and not on *what* the individuals are experiencing. In this research study, I focus on *how* graduate students are navigating their digital identity in order to investigate how SNSs are experienced, perceived, understood, and navigated by graduate students who are both emerging scholars and SNS users for personal expression.

The research is achieved by examining the aspect of reality from the perspectives and lived experiences of the group of participants (Orgill, 2012). Han and Ellis (2019) state that phenomenography is grounded in the 'intentionality' of human behaviours, characterized by mindfulness and consciousness, and thus involves various foci of awareness about the phenomenon, resulting in variations of experience. However, Orgill (2012) states that in phenomenographic studies, the researcher is not examining the phenomenon itself but rather the participant's ideas and experiences. In this research study, I examine the lived experiences and perceptions of graduate students as they navigate their digital identity as a way to investigate the participants' conceptions of the phenomenon of performativity in digital identity navigation.

The phenomenography approach differs slightly from phenomenology, which aims to clarify the structure and meaning of a phenomenon (Larsson & Holmström, 2007). Creswell & Creswell (2018) further back up this descriptor of phenomenology by stating that "phenomenological research is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as

described by participants. This description culminates in the essence of the experiences of several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon" (pp. 61-62).

The research design was conducted by "categories of description" (Marton, 1986). In phenomenography, categories of description are the qualitatively distinct perceptions (Marton, 1986) that emerge from the collected data that make up the phenomenographic essence of the phenomenon (Uljens, 1996). According to Åkerlind et al. (2005), categories of description arise out of the research focus on constituting crucial aspects of the collective experience, which leads to categories that are then described in terms of critical qualitative similarities and differences (p. 77). Orgill (2012) states that the goal of the phenomenographic study is "not only to identify people's conceptions and lived experiences of a phenomenon but to organize the ways of experiencing into conceptual categories of description. In this research study, categories of description allowed me to make meaning of the collective experiences of participants by sorting the distinct perceptions and experiences that appeared from the collected data. According to Bruce et al. (2004), constructed categories of description should reflect distinct features of the experiences and perceptions outlined by participants regarding the phenomenon. Categories of description need to describe similarities and differences in experiences and perceptions while logically linking together to encompass how the phenomenon is experienced (Bruce et al., 2004). This process allowed me to look for similarities and differences that describe how different people experience the phenomenon of performativity in digital identity navigation. In phenomenographic research, the categories derived from the data are essential in showing the phenomenon as they serve as the primary outcomes and are the most crucial result of phenomenographic research (Marton, 1986).

### **Selection Criteria and Recruitment**

When designing this study, the criteria for participants were that they must be current graduate students from any discipline, at either a Master's or Doctoral level. Participants also were confined geographically to Ontario, Canada. Looking for a diverse population, I sought participants of differing genders, races, and ethnicities, with varying follower counts on Twitter and Instagram. Participants had a public profile for me to observe their accounts through the scroll-back method before the semi-structured interviews.

### **Data Collection**

Using my Twitter and Instagram accounts that displayed my academic identity rather than my personal accounts, I put out a call for research participants using graphics made by myself (see APPENDIX D). I specifically sought out graduate students in Ontario, Canada, who considered themselves as both emerging scholars and users of these SNSs for personal expression to compile participants for this research.

While many SNS platforms exist, including LinkedIn, TikTok, Facebook, and Snapchat, I chose to analyze Twitter and Instagram specifically. This decision mainly stems from the manageability aspect of this study since I needed to find participants with open, public profiles. Additionally, I decided to analyze Twitter and Instagram since the two platforms are parallel in that they are digital environments where individuals can have academic and personal profile expressions. Twitter and Instagram also have the same affordances, as a public account may be followed by users whom the individual does not know and without a mutual following. These aspects of the SNSs represent context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013), adding another layer of complexity to the navigation of digital identity for graduate students.

The scroll-back method, conducted with this study's seven participants, occurred before the online semi-structured interviews. Because the scroll-back method can be employed when

studying social phenomena (Robards & Lincoln, 2020), I observed the participant's SNS profiles in order to then recall these posts during the semi-structured interviews as a "prompt in eliciting discussions around, for example, romantic relationships, family life, alcohol consumption, body image, political participation, and any aspect of life that might be visible and documented through social media" (Robards & Lincoln, 2020, p. 2).

Using semi-structured phenomenographic interviews as the second data collection tool, I could delve deep into the perceptions and experiences discussed by participants. In-depth interviews with participants served as explorative dialogue and were essential to my methods. The interview aimed for the participant to reflect on their experiences with me as the interviewer to understand the meaning behind their experiences (Orgill, 2012). Their experiences focused on navigating digital identity as graduate students in the digital age as both emerging scholars and SNS users for personal expression. Using semi-structured interviews was beneficial to this research, as I conducted the interviews using a set of pre-defined interview inquiries in addition to the natural transmission of knowledge and details arising from participants' responses. Semi-structured phenomenographic interviews also encouraged participants to reveal and express their unique ways of experiencing the shared phenomenon of performativity in attempts to show digital identity navigation as a performative act. According to Ayres (2008), interviews used in phenomenographic research allow the researcher to uncover the meanings of central themes of participants' lived experiences from their point of view.

I posed open-ended questions to participating graduate students, encouraging them to describe their perceptions and experiences affected by navigating their digital identity and utilizing SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression. Open questions are integral to phenomenographic studies, as open interviews allow participants to express their

perceptions, experiences, and conceptions personally (Orgill, 2012). The questions were developed to understand participants' lived experiences and perceptions about their digital identity navigation by exploring their decisions, thoughts, opinions, and feelings. Despite having several questions to discuss during the interview, I was prepared for the conversations to depart from the semi-structured list in some instances where the participant may want to express more profound or non-anticipated reflections (Orgill, 2012). I then directly referenced the observations made during the scroll-back method in order to discuss the navigational decisions made by the participant. This data collection method used audio and video recording to ensure I could revisit the collected responses for clarification in the data analysis stage. Additionally, this method of collection provided the most human connection as I got to engage in direct conversation with the participants since Åkerlind et al. (2005) acknowledge the significance of phenomenography facilitating a shared focus on human meaning as the research object.

Engaging in the scroll-back method of observation allowed me to collect information on both the process and the product (Han & Ellis, 2019) of how participants navigated and presented their digital identity to reflect how they perceive the phenomenon of performativity through what they act upon (Dall'Alba & Hasselgren, 1996; Han & Ellis, 2019). Then, conducting semi-structured interviews with participants provided the opportunity to understand better the students' perspectives and experiences (Han & Ellis, 2019). In phenomenographic research practice, combining data collection allows both breadth and depth of variations to be covered within the data while providing triangulation from multiple data sources (Lam, 2017; Han & Ellis, 2019).

## **Participants**



My sampling strategies consisted of purposeful convenience sampling to recruit participants belonging to a graduate student demographic that could provide in-depth and detailed information (Qualitative Sampling Techniques, 2017) about their perceptions and experiences, which influence how they navigate their digital identity. Purposeful sampling allowed me to consider whether potential participants experienced the phenomenon of performativity; and whether the number of participants was adequate for variations of experience to be revealed (Ellis, 2018). Additionally, Ellis (2018) discusses the use of convenience sampling in qualitative research to deal with practical issues such as lack of funding, limited time, and non-easily accessed participants.

The study recruited a total of seven participants. In phenomenographic research, having seven participants in the study is satisfactory as long as the participants have experienced the phenomenon under investigation and offer variations of experience in the collected data (Ellis, 2018). All participants self-identified as graduate students at either a Master's or Doctoral level who were currently enrolled in graduate school in Ontario, Canada, when participating in this study. Participants varied in gender, age, race and ethnicity, and graduate programs. Participants primarily belonged to the Millennial and Gen Z generations, with one participant belonging to Generation X (1965-1979).

Participants were allowed to create their pseudonyms during member-checking to protect them in this research study and ensure anonymity. Given (2008) states that member-checking is a strategy often used to optimize validifying qualitative research findings. According to Birt et al. (2016), member-checking includes the interpreted data returned to participants to check for accuracy, clarity, and resonance with their experiences. During this research study's member-checking process, or member or respondent validation (Given, 2008), participants were sent their

interview transcripts with attached screengrabs from the scroll-back method observations. No participants made explicit decisions about their pseudonyms, so I labelled each of the seven participants from A-G per the interview schedule.

*Participant A:* This participant was beginning her first year of the Master of Nursing in the Nurse Practitioner (MN/NP) program. She used both Twitter and Instagram, but primarily Instagram. At the time of participant recruitment, she had 24 Twitter followers and 322 Instagram followers.

*Participant B:* This participant was working towards his Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies. He used both Twitter and Instagram, but primarily Twitter and only provided his Twitter handle for the scroll-back method portion of data collection. At the time of participant recruitment, he had over twelve-thousand Twitter followers. During the interview, he provided two Instagram handles: one account had 471 followers, while the other had 102 followers. This participant was the only individual belonging to Generation X.

*Participant C:* This participant was working towards her Doctor of Philosophy in the Teacher Accountability Policy program. She used both Twitter and Instagram. At the time of participant recruitment, she had 236 Twitter followers and 271 Instagram followers. Although this participant lived in Ontario, Canada, like the other participants, she was obtaining her degree from an Australian higher education institution. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and travel restrictions, most of her degree occurred via online education while residing in Ontario.

*Participant D:* This participant was working towards his Master of Applied Science in the Materials Engineering program. He used only Instagram. At the time of participant recruitment, he had 116 Instagram followers.

*Participant E:* This participant was working towards her Doctor of Medicine (MD). She used only Instagram. At the time of participant recruitment, she had over one-thousand Instagram followers.

*Participant F:* This participant was working towards her Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies. She only provided her Twitter handle for this study, which at the time of participant recruitment, had 45 Twitter followers. She did briefly mention her Instagram profile during the interview portion of data collection, but it was not used to collect any data as she did not share the handles.

*Participant G:* This participant was working towards her Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies. She provided two Twitter handles to observe during the scroll-back method but no Instagram profile. At the time of participant recruitment, her Twitter following for her primary account was 482, while the other account had 13 followers.

### **Data Analysis**

In phenomenography, the data analysis comprises a description, analysis, and understanding of experiences detailed by the research participants (Marton, 1981). The focus of the analysis is on variations of experience rather than the variations of individuals recruited for the study (Marton, 1981). This focus allows for an exploration into how variations may occur within the experience of an individual (Marton, 1981), as there is an emphasis on displaying variation in both the perceptions of the phenomenon, as experienced by the participants, and in the "ways of seeing something" as experienced and described by the researcher (Pang, 2003). The primary data – the SNS profile observation via the scroll-back method and interviews from participants – helped supply a detailed understanding of their perceptions and experiences to produce an answer for the proposed research question. The secondary data, obtained from pre-

existing literature, helped situate this research in theory and academia while addressing the gap in the literature on the specific topic. A goal of this research was to contribute to the conversation on the topic, specifically focusing on the navigation of digital identity resulting in context collapse and performativity by graduate students engaging on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression.

Once prospective participants showed interest in participating in the study, they were sent the informed consent form (see APPENDIX E) to review while allowing them to ask any additional questions about the study and the data collection process. Individuals could then sign and return the consent form and provide their SNS handle for the scroll-back method if they were still interested in participating. Once consent forms were returned to me, I sent possible interview timeslots to the individuals that were both convenient for the participant and myself and immediately observed their SNS profile(s) provided to take four to five screenshots that could be discussed during the scheduled interview.

During the interviews conducted on Microsoft Teams, I obtained verbal consent about participating in the study and for transcription/recording purposes as the interviews occurred virtually. I reminded participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, explained how to contact me in the event of our call dropping or needing to reschedule the interview, and acknowledged that there would be around twelve questions for the first portion of the interview. Then the second portion would focus on observational screenshots pulled from their provided social media profiles. Prior to beginning the process of asking open-ended questions, I collected some surface-level demographic data about participants, outlined in *Table 2. Demographics of Participants*:

Participants (n = 7)		
	Number	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	2	28.6
Female	5	71.4
<b>Program</b>		
Nurse Practitioner	1	14.2
Educational Studies	3	42.8
Teacher Accountability Policy	1	14.2
Medicine	1	14.2
Materials Engineering	1	14.2
<b>Level of Graduate Studies</b>		
Master	2	28.6
Doctoral	5	71.4

I then began by asking participants if they were familiar with the concept of performativity. This question helped me gauge whether participants considered performativity when navigating digital identity consciously or unconsciously, depending on their familiarity. For participants who did not know about performativity, I provided a definition and positioned it in the context of digital identity navigation for graduate students. From this, I began to discuss with participants their experiences with navigating digital identity, interweaving their perceptions about digital identity navigation overall when juxta-positioned as emerging scholars and using the platforms for personal expression. The guiding questions for the semi-structured

interviews that followed focused on obtaining additional information on their perceptions and experiences about:

1. Influential factors,
2. Implications and opportunities stemming from navigational decisions,
3. Conversations, or lack thereof, surrounding the phenomenon of performativity,
4. Direct references to digital identity navigation via the observations made during the scroll-back method.

This thesis uses Marton's (1986) phenomenographic analysis process. The process is an empirically based approach (Marton, 1986; Richardson, 1999) that strives to recognize the qualitatively different ways individuals experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand phenomena (Marton, 1986). Ornek (2008) outlines the process as:

“**The first step** is familiarization, which means the researcher becomes familiar to the material by reading the transcripts. This step is important in making corrections in the transcripts. **The second step** is compilation of answers from participants to a certain question. The researcher should find the most significant elements in answers given by participants. **The third step** is a condensation, or reduction, of the individual answers to find the central parts of a dialogue. **The fourth step** is preliminary grouping or classification of similar answers. **The fifth step** is a preliminary comparison of categories. **The sixth step** is the naming of categories. **The last step** is a contrastive comparison of categories. It includes a description of the character of each category and similarities between categories.”

In addition to the primary phenomenographic analysis process, this thesis also includes Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive version of thematic analysis, as it serves as "an approach to

analyzing qualitative data to answer broad or narrow research questions about people's experiences, views and perceptions, and representations of a given phenomenon" (Brulé, 2021, para. 4). Braun and Clarke's (2006) five-stage analysis process consists of data familiarization, coding, thematic extraction, reviewing themes, and naming themes, which I use as a way to support the phenomenographic analysis process when developing categories of description. Both analysis processes complement each other, providing an opportunity to strengthen the data analysis process by aligning the stages of Braun and Clarke's analysis process that focuses on a given phenomenon through analyzing participant experiences, views and perceptions, and representations (Braun & Clark, 2006), with Marton's analysis process that results in recognizing the variations in individuals experiences, conceptualizations, perceptions, and understandings for the phenomena (Marton, 1986).

The online interviews were recorded for audio using the auto-transcription tool on Microsoft Teams. Once the interviews were complete, the transcriptions were immediately exported into Microsoft Word documents and looked over by myself for clarification. Once all interviews were complete and transcriptions had been reviewed and clarified for significant errors in readability, the transcription documents that included the direct posts screen captured from the scroll-back method portion of data collection were sent back to participants. This process was for member-checking purposes to ensure credibility and validation qualitatively, as Creswell (2007) acknowledges using terms such as credibility or validation is more in alignment with quantitative research than qualitative. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are ways of refining the concept of trustworthiness that parallels the quantitative assessment criteria of validity and reliability (Nowell et al., 2017). Therefore, member-checking serves as a strategy for credibility, as

credibility in qualitative research equates to internal validity concerned with truth value (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I then sent participants their interview transcripts back with highlighted excerpts of quotes that I would use in establishing the categories of description.

I familiarized myself with the data by reading over and clarifying the interview transcripts. Once this step was done, I compiled the transcripts into one large Microsoft Word document and re-read them to highlight quotes and excerpts related to their experiences and perspectives. To engage in coding and thematic extraction, I then went back through the original transcripts and highlighted quotes and excerpts that stood out to me as themes, knowing I would use them as a reference point when creating the categories of description.

I began Marton's (1986) phenomenographic analysis process. The first step of the phenomenographic analysis process aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006) first step in their reflexive version of thematic analysis: familiarization through transcript reading. In phenomenography, it is important to not only complete one reading of the data but to read or view the text multiple times in order to get a "broad sense of the conception (or conceptions) underpinning a set of data" (Harris, 2005, p. 107). According to Orgill (2012), in a phenomenographic study, transcripts need to be read multiple times from various perspectives to identify the various ways of experiencing the phenomenon.

The second step was sorting and compiling the qualitatively distinct perceptions and experiences that appeared from the data as answers to each of the questions outlined in the Interview Questions Guide (see APPENDIX A). As Hitchcock (2006) states, phenomenography focuses on the essence of the experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon, which can be derived from participants' answers to the semi-structured interview questions.



I re-read the transcript again extensively to develop initial ideas regarding specific participant responses that caught my attention as the researcher, mainly based on their differences and variations in experiences. In this third step, I looked for key reflections that described how different people experience the phenomenon of performativity through digital identity navigation. In phenomenographic research, the categories derived from the data are essential in showing the phenomenon. They serve as the primary outcomes and are the most important result of phenomenographic research (Marton, 1986). Orgill (2012) states that once the differing and varying ways of experiencing the phenomenon are clearly identified through the contextualization of participants' reflections, it is time for the researcher to organize them into categories of description. This step was in alignment with the coding step in Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive version of thematic analysis.

In the fourth step, I began to primarily group similar answers, developing the highlighted excerpts into categories, aligning with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic extraction and reviewing themes steps. There are three main criteria for the development of categories of description that I followed: (1) each category in the outcome space reveals something distinctive about a way of understanding the phenomenon; (2) the categories are logically related; and (3) the outcomes are parsimonious (Åkerlind, 2005; Orgill, 2012). I identified attributes of categories of descriptions and defined the categories during this phase of the analysis process (Orgill, 2012). This step is also a way for me to engage in the first level of coding: open coding. Open coding allows the researcher to focus on the text to define the distinct concepts and categories in the data, thus forming the basic unit of the analysis (Qualitative Coding & Analysis, 2009).

After carefully considering excerpts and highlighted quotes, I began the preliminary comparison of categories across participant transcripts. This step allowed me to not only ensure that the excerpts I had acknowledged when using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive version of thematic analysis were logically related (Orgill, 2012) categories across participants but also to engage in axial coding. I used my distinguished concepts and categories while re-reading the data to confirm they accurately represented interview responses and explored relatedness (Qualitative Coding & Analysis, 2009). The logical relationships between the categories create the outcome space of the study (Marton, 1986; Åkerlind, 2005; Orgill, 2012), which ordered the categories from internal navigational influences to external navigational influences.

The sixth step was to then name the categories, which aligned with the final step in Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive version of thematic analysis. As Harris (2005, p. 102) states:

“Researchers working within this tradition are concerned with mapping people's conceptions or ways of experiencing different phenomena. Similar conceptions are grouped together and are used to create categories of description, an abstraction of the collective meaning of similar conceptions. Each category of description represents a qualitatively different way of experiencing a phenomenon.”

Therefore, the four categories of description derived from the collected data: (1) self-fulfillment; (2) context collapse: academic and personal identities; (3) social influence; and (4) call-out culture, represent the qualitatively different ways of experiencing the phenomenon of performativity. When substantiated with participant quotes, these categories provide answers into how graduate students' perceptions and experiences influence the navigation of their digital identity. Each participant had distinct and descriptive perceptions and experiences about these four categories. Furthermore, these four categories are logically related (Marton, 1981), ordered

from internal to external navigational influences. During this phase of the analysis process, I was able to support the named categories with appropriate quotations from the transcripts (Orgill, 2012) using the previously highlighted excerpts and re-reading the transcripts to ensure the categories were stable.

Once the categories were sorted and named, I engaged in content analysis to complete the last step in the phenomenographic analysis process: a contrastive comparison of categories. Bengtsson (2016) states, "in qualitative content analysis, data are presented in words and themes, which makes it possible to draw some interpretation of the results" (p. 10). In my content analysis, I organized and elicited meaning from the experiences and perceptions about digital identity navigation in graduate students as they expressed their lived experiences. I found connections and relationships between the excerpts and then condensed them into broader, logically related categories (Delve, n.d.; Åkerlind, 2005) that highlighted variations and differences in participant experiences and perceptions. I then used latent content analysis, as it is extended to an interpretive level in which the researcher seeks to find the underlying meaning of the text, describing what the text is talking about (Bengtsson, 2016). In this case, it pertained to how the perceptions and experiences of graduate students influence their navigational approaches to digital identity, thus engaging the phenomenon of performativity. From this data, I was able to interpret the results to show the multiple conceptions that graduate students have for the phenomenon through the exploration of variations of experience, thus explaining how graduate students navigate their digital identity.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In the research, ethical considerations and responsibilities were of significant focus. Prior to recruiting participants and beginning data collection, I applied for my research to be accepted

by the REB at the University of Windsor. The purpose of receiving clearance from the REB is to examine research study proposals through the lens of potential risks for participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The REB approval can be found in APPENDIX B. I followed the correct REB and data ethics regulations to ensure this project always remained ethical, confidential, and appropriate. Therefore, there were no significant risks, inconveniences, or health and safety concerns for participants.

To ensure the research was as ethical as possible with human participants, as the sole researcher, my ethical obligations of collecting data from participants follow Bentley (2021) and were met by:

- Seeking informed consent prior to collecting and using data;
- Supplying Participant Information Sheets to make explicit all relevant details about the study;
- Reminding participants that the process is voluntary, and they are free to withdraw at any time;
- Informing participants confidentiality of data and privacy will be respected during and after the study;
- Secure storage of data.

Additionally, for the SNS profile observation, where I engaged in the scroll-back method, I reminded participants that any specific posts observed from their profiles did not reflect my personal opinion, judgment, or bias but were instead just instances where I wanted to better understand their decision process leading up to posting that specific piece of digital content.

A significant aspect of the data analysis process is meeting trustworthiness criteria, according to Nowell et al. (2017). As the researcher, it is vital to ensure that the data collection

and analysis occur precisely, consistently, and exhaustively through rich, descriptive detail (Nowell et al., 2017). Focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, referring back to literature (audit trails), and my reflexivity as the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were of utmost importance while engaging in the data collection and data analysis processes. To ensure that the data collection process remained valid and reliable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017; Korstjens & Moser, 2018), I meticulously considered all data collection steps in the process. I utilized probing questions alongside the pre-determined semi-structured interview questions to encourage participants to reveal as much as possible about the examples they gave regarding their perceptions and experiences (Bentley, 2021), seek clarification, diffuse potential confusion, and deepen participant statements, including thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and descriptions of the experiences regarding the topic. The questions posed in the interviews were designed by myself, engaging in credibility, dependability, reflexivity, and audit trails (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Then, I exhibited extensive attention to detail during the data analysis process, using both Marton's (1986) phenomenographic analysis process and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process to support the exploration of the phenomenon of performativity experienced by graduate students. Both analysis processes are in alignment with the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Norwell et al. (2017): (1) familiarizing yourself with your data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Through these similar phases, I engaged in confirmability, audit trails, reflexivity, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how higher education scholars at a graduate level perceive and experience their navigation of digital identity on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression, in the context of performativity. In conducting this study, I investigated the experiences and perceptions of current graduate students navigating digital identity to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of performativity. As a qualitative theoretical framework, a phenomenographic study was used to investigate individuals' approaches to, and their understandings of, a phenomenon they experience in their day-to-day lives (Orgill, 2012). However, as Marton (1981) states, phenomenography serves not as the exploration into the phenomenon itself but rather as the qualitatively differing ways for the phenomenon to be experienced through perceptions and lived experiences.

The aim of using phenomenography in this research was to develop a set of categories of description derived from participant experiences and perceptions regarding navigating digital identity as both emerging scholars and for personal use. After a comprehensive literature review, I argue this study's topic has furthered the acknowledgement of the phenomenon of performativity in graduate students as they navigate their digital identities. The main goal of this research is to inspire critical conversations, explicitly focusing on the navigation of digital identity resulting in context collapse and performativity by graduate students engaging in SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression. By achieving this goal, this study may potentially help emerging scholars and SNS users reflect on the impact of their decisions for future and further digital identity navigation.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

In this chapter, the participants provide quotes and excerpts through direct quotations and interpretative commentary that has been pulled from the semi-structured interviews. The focus taken in this study is on the experience of being a graduate student navigating SNSs as both an emerging scholar and for personal expression and how their perceptions and independent experiences influence their digital identity navigation. Of the seven participants recruited for this study, each individual offers their own descriptive lived experiences and perceptions about performativity, digital identity navigation, and the influential factors that result in personal decisions about their SNS navigation. All participants provided detailed responses regarding their digital identity navigation on SNSs as emerging scholars and for personal expression.

#### **Participant Patterns**

Participants express personal stories and situations, thoughts and feelings, and behaviours, alongside insights into their decision-making processes – or lack thereof – during interviews and the scroll-back data collection method. In the descriptive and detailed recounts of their digital identity navigation, participants articulate diverse perspectives and experiences that resulted in their approaches and navigation.

*Table 2. Demographics of Participants* highlights seven participants in total: two men and five women. Regardless of their gender, generation grouping, level of studies (Master or Doctoral), program, or account size (how many followers they have), all participants express unique perceptions and experiences that influence their navigational approaches to digital identity.

Several participants recognize that digital identity navigation requires conscious deliberation of the various roles they perform in their everyday lives: student, partner, scholar, professional, friend, and parent, as examples. In doing so, participants acknowledge levels of context collapse. Conversely, a few participants acknowledge that their navigational approaches reflect unconscious performativity brought to light by discussing their behaviours, experiences, and perceptions. Thus, all participants indicate variations of experience regarding levels of performativity, whether they consciously acknowledge the performative behaviours or not.

### **Analytic Distinctions Between Twitter and Instagram**

Four participants use both Twitter and Instagram. Of those four, one male and one female participant use Twitter as their primary SNS, one uses Instagram as her primary SNS, and one uses both Twitter and Instagram as her primary SNSs. Two participants only have Instagram accounts, comprised of one female and one male participant. One female participant only uses Twitter as her primary SNS but has two distinct accounts on the platform. The participant with the smallest Twitter following has 13 followers, while the largest account out of the participant group has over twelve-thousand followers. For Instagram, the participant with the smallest following has 116 followers, while the participant with the largest following has over one-thousand followers.

Concerning the participant's level and program of study influencing their choice of SNS, the participant obtaining her Doctor of Philosophy in the Teacher Accountability Policy program was the only individual in the study to use Twitter and Instagram as their primary SNS. Meanwhile, the three participants in the Doctor of Philosophy program in Educational Studies all primarily, or only, use Twitter as their main SNS to present their digital identity. The three participants in the Sciences (Master of Nursing in the Nurse Practitioner program, Master of



Applied Science in the Materials Engineering program, and Doctor of Medicine) all primarily, or only, use Instagram as their main SNS to present their digital identity.

### **Participants' Understanding of the Term "Performativity"**

Three of seven participants have prior familiarity with the concept of performativity before the interview, while four have little to no understanding of the term. Two female participants directly offer their understanding of performativity:

*Participant C:* Yeah. I find that on some platforms, people are more performative than others, or performative in certain ways, or expressing certain personas.

*Participant G:* Yes, the idea of putting on a persona.

The two participants who offer their recognition of performativity directly use the term "persona" when explaining their understanding. The third participant familiar with the term is male and gave a direct, one-word response of "Yes."

The three participants familiar with the term are all working towards their Doctor of Philosophy degree, two in the Educational Studies program and one in the Teacher Accountability Policy program.

Whether individuals are conscious of performativity or not, it occurs in digital identity navigation. Thus, there is a need to encourage conversation on it, especially at a higher education level (Salman, 2015), since these participants are all graduate students in the higher education environment. Specifically focusing on the navigation of digital identity resulting in context collapse and performativity by graduate students engaging on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression can achieve the primary goal of this research to contribute to conversations.

### **Discussing Performativity in Digital Identity Navigation**

However, despite less than half of the participants stating they were familiar with the specific term of performativity, six out of seven participants express discussing performativity or digital identity with others. Five participants express how often these conversations occur and with whom.

For one participant, she highlights her own personal interest in discussing performativity with other people, noting it happens frequently:

*Participant C:* All the time. That's one of my favorite topics. I like talking about anything to do with perception. I have those conversations very often.

From an educator perspective, one male and one female participant acknowledge how the conversation occurs between them and their students:

*Participant B:* Every day, in my house. I also teach it. It's a pretty constant conversation.

*Participant G:* I have the conversation on a regular basis with my students about their identity and the way that they are perceived and the way that that could hurt them in their future. But at this level with other like colleagues or peers.... that conversation I don't think happens.

Two other participants state that they discuss digital identity with friends in the context of how others present themselves online. The first participant indicates the conversations occur when they believe someone handles their digital identity “stupidly.” In contrast, the second participant acknowledges the discussions with her friends occur when someone else makes a “controversial” post:

*Participant D:* I was gonna say never... but I have a little group chat that we always send random posts and memes to each other. Every now and again we send something and we just talk about how stupidly they handled it, usually. So we probably talk about it at least once a week.

*Participant E:* Yes, but not often ... Every now and then, one of my friends sees something that someone else posted that can get a little controversial. I've talked with my friends about Instagram in the context of others.

The one participant who overtly states she did not discuss performativity with others is a Vietnamese international graduate student. Despite noting that she does not have conversations on the topic, she acknowledges the positive influence it may have on discussing it:

*Participant F:* I think it would be very beneficial to have that conversation. I don't know about the impact of social media, if some people are conscious about that... yes they get some benefits, but some people are negatively influenced by what they post on social media.

Encouraging open conversation can help individuals experiencing the navigation of their digital identity understand the performative aspect of doing so, as *Participant C* acknowledges the isolating and uncomfortable emotions that emerge from feeling as if they are the only individual to perform their digital identity:

*Participant C:* If we have these conversations and people realize that we all have performativity in mind... then it feels more comfortable and someone will think 'Oh, I'm not alone in thinking 'am I just performing?''

### **Perceptions and Experiences Influencing the Navigation of Digital Identity**

Participants provided rich depictions of their perceptions and experiences that directly influence the navigation of their digital identity when asked to reflect on the navigational decisions they make before posting and engaging with content. These navigational decisions could include, but were not limited to, direct and deliberate posting or engagements, unplanned and “erratic” posting and engagements, and audience segregation and/or impression management (Goffman, 1959). When directly asked about their overall approach to navigating their digital

identities, participants have varying responses. Some participants take direct and deliberate approaches, such as:

*Participant C:* Most of it is deliberate. Twitter, if I have a new article or some sort of thought I'm having while I'm doing some sort of academic related work, I'll share that on Twitter. Instagram, there's a photo that I take that I'm proud of or I like. Instagram stories I post are not deliberate. I mostly share stories to my 'close friends', so not 'publicly' publicly. It's usually just on an impulse like, 'oh, I just want to share the story because it's funny'. I think that aspect is the only one that's not deliberate.

*Participant D:* Minimalist and inoffensive ... throwing up a post of [me] and [my] significant other once a month, or every other week ... as long as [my] caption isn't anything you know even slightly offensive.

*Participant F:* It takes me some time to post everything. I think about how I appeal to people.

These three participants had varying content when their SNS profiles were observed for the scroll-back method. *Participant C* consistently posted on both her Twitter and Instagram accounts, distinctly presenting her digital identity on Twitter in the context of her academic identity and using her Instagram account to express her personal interest and hobby of photography, distinct from her academic endeavours. From an observational lens, her self-report regarding her navigational approach to presenting her digital identity during the interview portion of the data collection is in alignment with the digital identities presented for viewers on the SNSs. *Participant D* solely uses Instagram to present his digital identity, focusing primarily on expressing himself from a personal approach. The scroll-back method observations made from his Instagram account align with his self-report about his navigational approach to presenting his digital identity during the interview, as his posts pertained to representing his personal life through content focused on his relationship and social experiences, often posted

without captions at all. *Participant F*, an international Vietnamese graduate student, primarily posted on her Twitter account, which was the only SNS profile provided for the scroll-back method of observation. The observations of her Twitter account align with the self-reports of navigating her digital identity on Twitter, curating deliberate content that presents herself as both an emerging scholar and using the SNS for personal expressions such as connecting with Canadian friends and social experiences.

Meanwhile, other participants express taking less deliberate and planned navigational approaches, such as:

*Participant A*: I'm just being me. I'm just sharing what I think is safe [content] to share. Hopefully I'm being perceived the way I think I look. But you never know.

*Participant B*: It's erratic. I think if you asked other people, they might suggest that I have no plan.

For *Participant A*, she mentions that her navigational approach to presenting her digital identity primarily on Instagram is a direct representation of herself. She acknowledges that the content she shares is what she believes safe – hoping to avoid contributing to anything deemed overtly controversial – in an attempt to be perceived by viewers in a way that aligns with how she perceives her digital identity. From an observational lens, during the scroll-back method, her digital identity presents an explicit level of personal expression over academic representation. Throughout her interview, *Participant A* acknowledges the dualities of beings, personally contextualizing herself as an example of an individual who is both professional in the workplace and “fun” and social in her personal and social interactions.

*Participant B*, conversely, did not expressly acknowledge his own navigation to digital identity as a direct representation of self but did mention how others may perceive his digital identity navigation. During the scroll-back method observation, his Twitter highlighted a mixture

of academic-based content and posts that depicted his personal interests, hobbies, thoughts and opinions.

Two other participants acknowledge taking a less deliberate approach to their digital identity navigation; however, they particularly mention their navigational approaches in the context of appealing to specific audiences. Both female participants express the type of content they tend to post on their SNS profiles in two varying ways but highlight that they do not or are unsure of if their digital identity is navigated to appeal to specific audiences:

*Participant E:* I don't really have specific audiences in mind. I also don't really have a specific process in mind. It's really just like whenever I'm going out and we'll take photos. And if I like one of the photos, I'll post it.

*Participant G:* I don't know if I'm appealing to certain audiences. I think that you would probably find in my social media that there wasn't much there that would be putting others or systems, organizations, or things like that down, but rather hopefully trying to lift people up.

During the scroll-back method observation, *Participant E's* Instagram consisted of content that visually represented herself and her social engagements, such as hanging out with friends and family. There were a few specific posts that acknowledged academic achievements, such as graduating from her undergraduate program and beginning her graduate studies in Medical School. Overall, her posts projected more of a self-fulfilled digital identity navigational approach rather than posts influenced by external factors such as deliberately appealing to others or specific audiences, which aligns with her self-report during the interview.

*Participant G's* Twitter accounts conveyed her acknowledgment of her professional identity influencing the navigation of her digital identity, directly exhibited in the bio of one of her Twitter accounts when she explicitly states that tweets are her own and re-tweets do not serve as endorsements. Although she is unsure whether she is appealing to or segregating distinct

audiences in her navigational approaches, she distinctly acknowledges what perception she thinks viewers have when looking at her SNS content and engagements.

When explicitly asked, participants recognize their navigational approaches to digital identity and can articulate them, positioning them in the context of their academic, personal, and offline identities. Whether they are conscious or unconscious actions, behaviours, and engagements, some recognize they engage in impression management, audience segregation, and experience context collapse. Even when participants do not deliberately recognize these experiences and perceptions as performativity, they occur in their digital identity navigation and result in performative acts.

From these direct responses come the four categories of description that graduate students as SNS users are experiencing through variated experiences and perceptions, but still all under the umbrella of the phenomenon of performativity: self-fulfillment, the context collapse of academic and personal identities, social influence, and call-out culture.

### **Categories of Description**

Despite the variation in experience and perceptions emphasized by all participants, there were shared categories of description that provided insight into the shared phenomenon of performativity. I followed three main criteria for the development of categories of description: each category in the outcome space had to reveal something distinctive about a way of understanding the phenomenon; the categories were related; and the outcomes were parsimonious (Åkerlind, 2005; Orgill, 2012). I read and re-read participant transcripts from the semi-structured interviews numerous times from various perspectives (Orgill, 2012) to identify how participants were experiencing the phenomenon. From these interview transcripts, I pulled four key categories of descriptions after differing and varying ways of experiencing the

phenomenon were clearly identified through the contextualization of participants' statements (Orgill, 2012).

Individuals may only sometimes consciously consider the phenomenon of performativity when navigating their digital identity, as there is a gap in the academic literature on the topic (Salman, 2015; Becker Marcano, 2018) and not all participants were familiar with the term. However, it is something they engage in, whether knowingly or unknowingly, when basing navigational decisions on (1) self-fulfillment; (2) context collapse: academic and personal identities; (3) social influence; and (4) call-out culture. These four categories of description offer insight into how variations of experience occur for individuals, indicating the overall shared phenomenon of performativity but focusing on the different ways each participant perceived and experienced the navigation of their digital identity.

Then, since categories of description should be hierarchically or logically related (Marton, 1981; Orgill, 2012), I examined the data for the logical relationships between the categories to create the outcome space of the study (Marton, 1986; Åkerlind, 2005; Orgill, 2012). During this process, I considered the logical order in which self-fulfillment, the context collapse of academic and personal identities, social influence, and call-out culture could relate. Ultimately, I ordered the categories from internal navigational influences, beginning with 'self-fulfillment,' to external navigational influences, ending with 'call-out culture.' The second and third categories of 'context collapse: academic and personal identities' and 'social influence' were in the middle, with 'context collapse: academic and personal identities' listed after 'self-fulfillment' and 'social influence' listed before 'call-out culture' (*see Figure 1 below*).



# Categories of Description

LOGICALLY RELATED

SZCYREK, 2023

INTERNAL NAVIGATIONAL  
INFLUENCES

CATEGORY 1.  
SELF-FULFILLMENT

CATEGORY 2.  
CONTEXT COLLAPSE:  
ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL  
IDENTITIES

CATEGORY 3.  
SOCIAL INFLUENCE

CATEGORY 4.  
CALL OUT CULTURE

EXTERNAL NAVIGATIONAL  
INFLUENCES



## Self-fulfillment

The first category of description is self-fulfillment, which is defined as “the combination of the hopes we have for our lives as well as the plan we create for achieving them” (Self-Fulfillment: Definition & Explanation, 2015). By sorting the qualitatively distinct perceptions and experiences from participant responses, I pulled self-fulfillment out as a key category of description due to how it was evident in participants’ lived experiences. Participants’ digital identity navigation is heavily influenced in their attempts to achieve self-fulfillment, focusing on the hopes they have concerning their career, discipline or program, personality, personal goals and experiences, and social lives that then influence their digital identity navigation as they

perform specific ways in order to achieve these hopes through digital identity expression tangibly. In connection to the key research question, it provides an answer to how graduate students use their perceptions and experiences to navigate their digital identity as both emerging scholars and social network participants.

Self-fulfillment is the most internal navigational influence out of the four categories. Self-fulfillment occurs internally, as participants express that performing their digital identity is for themselves first and foremost, and then potential audiences. The participants display variation in experience and perceptions through their unique navigational decisions and actions by recounting personal experiences, beliefs, thoughts, and opinions that I then categorized into self-fulfillment. The participants explicitly expressed that their navigational approach on SNS includes self-fulfillment, whether it be the content they post, engage with, or share on their accounts. From making conscious decisions about expressing their interests and hobbies, being their target audience, and being consciously aware of how others will perceive what they do decide to share, participants navigate their digital identity in a way which produces self-fulfillment on a personal level.

In terms of similar patterns of self-fulfillment, many participants state that their navigation of digital identity on SNSs consists of posting content that is directly for themselves. Participants expressed a variation in their perception and experiences that led them to navigate their digital identity through posting content that achieved their hopes of curating their digital identity with themselves in mind, such as using the SNSs as a personal record-keeping tool or even envisioning themselves as their target audience when posting content:

*Participant A:* Generally, I would say most of my posts are for myself.

*Participant B:* It's a personal record for me, in a sense. I'm like, 'oh yeah, I remember when I was doing that. I don't think of it as a public thing at all.

*Participant D:* Just like when I tell jokes, if I post anything, it's more for me. I guess I'd be my target audience.

*Participant F:* When I post good things on social media, it's also for me as well. It's not only for the audience.

Meanwhile, some participants did acknowledge performativity concerning their navigation of digital identity while still speaking about how and why it ties into posting for themselves and how they wish to be perceived. Participants had varying reasons for navigating their digital identity in a manner that achieved self-fulfillment, ranging from their motivational factors to acknowledging fulfilling their values and beliefs:

*Participant A:* So obviously I'm motivated to post about things that interest me, just like anyone. I'm displaying myself for people. So my own personal views heavily influence what I share.

*Participant B:* Part of my performativity on social media is about showing who I am.

*Participant F:* So the way I use social media, I want people to think about me the way I want ... I don't want people to identify me in a way that's not who I am, on social media.

*Participant G:* I don't think that I'm performing for anybody in particular, because I think it really represents my actual core values ... I believe you behave in the way that you would want to be perceived, right? And so if I act in the way that I want to be, then in a way, I'm performing for myself to live up to that in a way.

However, a few participants provided insight into why they make the choices they do about digital identity navigation, noting that they make specific and deliberate choices that reflect how they want to convey their online presence and how they achieve doing so. The participants outlined their variation in experience through personal stories, such as:

*Participant C:* I don't expect anyone to look at my social media accounts and be able to engage what my personality is like in my personal life. It's funny because my sister went on my Twitter

once. And she was like, who is this? I feel like you're a different person. And I'm like, yeah, this is deliberate.

*Participant E:* I try to like keep it light and fun of my Instagram. I definitely don't take it too seriously. At the same time I don't take it not seriously, where I'm just posting anything. I'm kind of in that middle range where it's light and airy, but still a couple of serious photos.

Overall, participants expressed variations in their experiences, perceptions, and navigational approaches to presenting their digital identity. In these varied experiences, each participant's SNS profile observations – whether it be Twitter, Instagram, or both – were taken into consideration to provide context for interview responses and as a way to delve deeper into participant self-reports.

### ***Participant A***

*Participant A's* experience as a Registered Nurse, outside of her role as a graduate student, contributes significantly to her digital identity performance. She recognizes that a lack of control in her day-to-day professional life leads her to control what she can, which is her time off work. As she notes, her digital identity reflects her active social life outside of work and academics:

*Participant A:* I've been okay with people knowing that I have an active social life. I get teased about it a lot at work though. It looks like I'm always doing stuff, but I think being a nurse right now is stressful. I try to have things to look forward to. When I'm at work, I can mentally compartmentalize... it's okay that things are bad today, because tomorrow I'm gonna go hang out with friends ... I like to control my responses to everything. If I feel like I can't, I will find something as close as possible that I can control. I can control my off time, and that allows me to accept the lack of control when I'm at work or in professional mode.

During the scroll-back method of observation, *Participant A*'s Instagram profile particularly highlights her active social life, as her posts depict her engagements with friends and family outside of work and academics. This approach reflects a level of self-fulfillment, as she hopes for her social life to provide a much-needed break from her professional and academic roles, and her digital identity reflects how she achieves this. Specifically, when asked if she would consider her posts obtained from the scroll-back method as a performative act for specific audiences, hoping to appeal to friends and family over academic and professional peers, she states:

*Participant A:* I'm probably more appealing to the fun people, the people that are non-judgmental. Most people let loose. I share it more knowing that my friends and family appreciate it.

### ***Participant D***

Similarly, *Participant D*'s personality plays a significant role in his digital identity performance. He recognizes that his digital identity is an extension of how he feels and behaves in his personal offline life, and therefore he uses his digital identity to display specific instances of happenings in his personal social life rather than focusing on his academic achievements or endeavours:

*Participant D:* Even my personal life, I'm more on the quiet side and less obnoxious and in your face. On my social media, I just have a few posts ... It's just kind of like a highlight reel. If it's not something I want to talk to someone about in person, it's not something I'm gonna post.

The scroll-back method observations made for *Participant D* reflect alignment with his self-report, as his Instagram content is primarily posted without captions and serves as a strictly visual representation of his social life, mainly reflecting his romantic partner and their life together – such as an engagement announcement and vacation photos. His approach to presenting his digital identity establishes a level of self-fulfillment. He directly mentions hoping

to avoid posting anything on his Instagram account that he does not want to discuss with others in his personal offline life. He achieves this by selectively posting images that serve as a highlight reel and indicate experiences or events he would gladly discuss with others offline. For example, when asked directly about a post of his engagement to his partner, *Participant D* broke down the process of posting it by stating:

*Participant D*: The only reservation was to choose [which] photos. This is just a big event in my life, so wanted to share it with people ... whoever I didn't tell can now see the same information that I was already telling everyone else ... my basic audience is my friends and family who I wanna share what I do in life. They can see I'm still alive, still doing stuff, and attempting my best go at life.

### ***Participant B***

*Participant B* expresses his approach to digital identity, acknowledging the deliberate choices regarding what he posts and why he posts, signifying that he makes conscious decisions based on his personal relationships with individuals on SNSs:

*Participant B*: I want people to understand the context in which that [performativity] happens, right? Whether it's carpentry or music or social issues or whatever else I'm doing. So much of the work that I do is about relationships ... there are people who are experts in the field who I only have a music relationship with. There are people in the field who I only have a carpentry relationship with.

The scroll-back observation method conducted on *Participant B*'s Twitter profile highlights his hopes for building and maintaining relationships using his digital identity to connect with individuals from various contexts of his life, such as professional, personal, and academic relationships. In doing so, he navigates context collapse through grad student identity, professional institutional identity, and professional public identity as he presents a digital identity

comprised of all these roles in one digital profile. When specifically asked about how he navigates his digital identity based on these opportunities for engagement, he recognizes the positive influence of his digital identity in different contexts to build community with other SNS users, regardless of their affiliation with his academic or personal identities:

*Participant B:* It totally benefits me ... The term networking, for me, has always been cold. I like the word community. So part of my performativity on social media is about showing who I am.

***Participant F***

In a similar sense, *Participant F* acknowledges how Twitter helps her network as a graduate student, allowing her to perform her digital identity in a way that furthers and fulfills her hopes for establishing academic connections:

*Participant F:* Social media is a great way to self-advertise. I'm just a student, but it lets some people know what I'm doing, what I achieve. People now are engaged in social networks.

Directors, CEOs, professors, etcetera. Twitter shows our activities in the newsfeed, so that's why I post good things and achievements. I can let people know who I am, what I do, in ways to have more network reach.

However, *Participant F's* Twitter profile not only reflects her hope to broadly connect to other academics using Twitter as a tool for community building but also using the SNS to fulfill a need to establish a connection with the new culture in which she is now personally immersed. As an international student foreign to Canada's culture and social norms, she experiences a unique need distinct from other participants familiar with Canadian contexts. In one post in particular, observed during the scroll-back method portion of data collection, *Participant F* posted a photo of an audience of people with the caption, "My first in-person comedy show ever! I missed some points during the show, but it was not important. I had a great time with a

friend, and this was a break for this busy summer.” When directly asked about this post, she states:

*Participant F:* I wanted to know more about the culture. I posted it because I wanted to let people know I am trying to emerge by coming to the show. This show is so difficult for me, rather challenging because, the actors there - he shared the stories and made a lot of references to different things. And if I don't know those things, I don't understand the story.

Her caption alongside her attached image provides a level of transparency to viewers, acknowledging her unique experience as an international student while still using her digital identity to network with academic peers and viewers and also to connect with her new country and community.

The participants, although having varying experiences and perceptions that influence their navigational approaches to the presentation of their digital identity, navigate aspects such as context collapse and impression management to connect their digital identity to others, both offline and online, in one digital representation. Building on these connections requires them to take into consideration the reasons behind why they make specific navigational approaches in order to continuously present a digital identity that reflects the hopes they have for how they are perceived online.

### **Context Collapse: Academic and Personal Identities**

The second category of description concerns the occurrence of context collapse for graduate students based on their academic and personal identities. When conducting these interviews, I wanted to understand better how individuals navigated their academic and personal identities while expressing themselves on digital platforms, as the curation of a digital identity collapses their offline, academic, and personal identities into one digital representation. As previously stated, identity is the conceptualization of self in the context of presentations, self-



representations, individualistic distinctions, and ways of approaching and understanding "being" in our everyday lives (Cover, 2015). I pulled this category of description from the analysis of the collected data that participants positioned their academic and personal identities vis-à-vis on SNSs. It connects to the key research question because it provides answers for the different identities that can occur in a single space – and in this case, the digital environment of SNSs – and how those identities are navigated under one primary digital identity.

The context collapse of academic and personal identities occurs as the second category of description after self-fulfillment. This category mainly pertains to internal navigational influence but also highlights some external navigational influences. Therefore, it is ordered logically after the first category but before the third and fourth. Participants expressed variation in experience and perception as they described distinct navigational approaches to their digital identity based on their differing personal experiences, beliefs, thoughts, and opinions regarding their performative roles as emerging scholars and users of SNSs for personal expression. I categorized these lived experiences and perceptions detailed by participants into the category of the context collapse of academic and personal identities.

Even when taking a blended approach to their digital identity navigation, where they engaged on SNSs in both academic and personal manners, participants acknowledged the nuances of participating in the digital environment as both emerging scholars and using SNS for personal use. Several participants conveyed their thought process behind navigating the context collapse that occurs on SNSs and their reasoning for making the decisions that they do.

Participants explicitly provided their approaches when asked directly about their presence on SNSs and whether they believe they act more in alignment with their academic/professional or personal identity. The range of approaches showed the variation in experience by participants.

Some indicated a more professional and academic approach, while others mentioned using their SNSs mainly for personal expression. Each participant, regardless of their approach, provided distinct and unique perceptions and experiences:

*Participant A:* What I hold back is probably more my professional identity... the social me wants to post everything, but the professional me understands that that would not be in my best interest ... Certainly there are things that I don't share on social media because I represent a professional organization and I just keep that in mind.

*Participant B:* I just don't think of Instagram as a place where I put my professional work. It's my bike and cooking. A representation of the things I'm interested in, right? ... Twitter is some of that, but again it's filtered because I think of that as a pseudo-professional space, whereas on Instagram I just post pictures of stuff that I come across.

*Participant C:* I just want people to see my academic side. And it is interesting because I know there's some people who engage more personally even as an academic, but I guess it's what you prefer. And right now I just have that energy on Twitter to just engage in a more academic way than post anything personal.

*Participant D:* Basically my thoughts are separate boxes and I pretty much like to keep things [on social media] that way as well, like even on my computer I have separate folders for everything.

*Participant F:* I'm more conscious about what I post, I don't share personal stories, negative things, controversial topics, etcetera.

*Participant G:* Before I post, I always ask myself... are you comfortable with your school community – as an example – seeing this? And, my employer follows me. So if I'm comfortable with them seeing that, then I post it.

Some participants indicated that although they often engage in the conscious act of impression management through their digital identity navigation, they ideally wish that there was more understanding of holding differing or opposing identities in the same space. Each

participant expressed their belief regarding this topic, highlighting the variation in experience through varied opinions, personal stories, and understanding of others:

*Participant A:* I think we need to accept that people can be professional at work and less professional at home. I would hope that they would reserve judgment for my performance of what I am like when I am in school or when I am at work ... To me you can definitely be both. In fact, I kind of like dynamic people. We can't all be put into one box, we have lots of different roles that we play.

*Participant C:* People didn't think so much back then [about digital identity navigation], including myself. So I go back on my Facebook and I'm like, wow, I shared so much about my life. And now I think about it way more because I think people think more about other people's social media content. So that's why I've really scaled back on how much I share.

*Participant G:* For me it's also just showing that there's multiple sides to everybody. There's a lot of different personas to everybody.

Participants expressed variations in their experiences, perceptions, and navigational approaches to presenting their digital identity. Each participant had varying experiences and perceptions specifically surrounding the context collapse of their academic and personal identities influencing the construction and presentation of their digital identity. Observations made during their SNS profiles during the scroll-back method were taken into consideration to support and contextualize participants' self-reports during interviews.

### ***Participant A***

*Participant A's* experience navigating her digital identity highlights her preference for using SNSs for personal expression over academic or professional uses. She mentions specifically the content she posts reflecting her having fun and drinking socially without giving

much concern as to how viewers may perceive and form opinions based on her digital identity performance:

*Participant A:* I have a pretty active social life. I never really thought about how that would be perceived. I guess I assumed everybody had a fun social life. I'm gonna be honest with you. I haven't been overly concerned about it. I don't have pictures hitting bongs with a bunch of people or anything ... I think definitely I have social media presence that indicates I drink socially and have a lot of fun.

*Participant A's* Instagram account depicts her social habits during the scroll-back method, as the images she shares with viewers consist of friends, family, and social interactions. When asked directly about her thought processes before posting content, such as having specific audiences in mind, she states:

*Participant A:* I have an active social life and I have embraced that and unapologetically share it.

### ***Participant E***

Similarly, *Participant E* navigates her digital identity by focusing primarily on performing a more personal approach. She states that the content she posts is fixated on presenting the image of her social life. However, unlike *Participant A*, she directly mentions that she does include the occasional photo that signifies her academic achievements amongst the images of her personal life outside of school:

*Participant E:* My platform is very much tailored to my social life. Here and there I'll have a couple of photos from when I graduated undergrad, or a little ceremony a couple weeks ago ...

My Instagram is very much geared towards friends and family.

### ***Participant D***

For *Participant D*, he expressly acknowledges his approach to differentiating his academic and personal identities, which encompasses navigating his digital identity through compartmentalization to present a reflection of his identity and interests:

*Participant D*: My current account is my personal account that I like to post things that I do here and there. [Compartmentalization] is the easiest way for me to understand everything going on around me ... I just need to go into my different folders and realize what I'm actually working on.

Participant D's Instagram account reflected his personal life more than his academic achievements and experiences during the scroll-back method observations. Focusing primarily on content that included his partner, friends, and himself, there was little to no indication of him being a current graduate student. When asked about his navigational approach focusing primarily on his identity rather than his academic, he states:

*Participant D*: If I wanted to do something more academically inclined, I'd probably open up another account and make that specific to that.

### ***Participant C***

Conversely, *Participant C* navigates digital identity by deliberately segregating academic and personal identities on SNSs from an academic identity perspective. She makes specific content selections depending on the platform she is utilizing, as she has both Twitter and Instagram profiles. When asked how she manages to present her digital identity on the platforms, she claims:

*Participant C*: For me, social media is that space where I'm curating things. I use my Instagram to showcase or share my photography because it's one of my prominent hobbies. And then Twitter is mostly – or solely – for academic purposes. So having those two [separate] audiences in mind, and those two personas in mind... I do definitely think about how I'm portraying myself.

These distinct approaches are evident in the scroll-back method observations and align with *Participant C*'s self-report. Her Twitter account highlights her existence as a graduate student and emerging scholar. In contrast, her Instagram account displays her hobby of photography, but both are curated to reflect specific content to control her digital identity presentation to viewers. However, there is a subtle personal identity influence in her digital identity, as she notes moments of transparency in her Twitter posts and personal values, such as posting that she attended a climate strike event on Instagram:

*Participant C:* I really embrace both parts of my identity, being Canadian and being of Bangladeshi decent. But then I don't see that as much on Twitter. I wanna put that out there and hopefully have more brown people notice, then I can engage with them or they can feel comfortable. I've talked to a few people in the past who are South Asian in academia, and they don't feel so comfortable sharing their South Asian aspects ... I wouldn't be in the field that I'm in if I didn't feel comfortable being myself and it didn't align with my values. Making sure that the academic community I'm in fosters or supports my epistemic stances.

### ***Participant F***

For *Participant F*, her experience as an international graduate student provides specific insight to how geolocation plays a role in SNSs popularity and use. She acknowledges how that influences her to navigate her digital identity in accordance with how others are using the platform, even addressing language and cultural barriers she faces while doing so:

*Participant F:* With Twitter, it's more popular in North America so people may use it for both academic and personal life. So that's why I post both – achievements, studying, social events, activities that I do with my friends ... Most of my followers on Twitter are friends and teachers here in Canada, so I post in English. I have to write it correctly because you post something and lots of people read and if they find errors – is it worth reading or appearing to their account?

During the scroll-back method observation of her Twitter account, *Participant F*'s digital identity reflected both her personal expression and her academic identity on one SNS. When asked about her approach, *Participant F* specifically highlights using one SNS profile per platform, combining her academic and personal identities into one digital identity:

*Participant F*: I have just one account for all family, friends, teachers, professor, all the same.

That's why I am more conscious with my posts. Mostly I just post something interesting, great, or that helps other people.

### ***Participant G***

However, two participants, in particular, hold professional positions in academia and education, which further influences their navigation of digital identity based on their personal and academic identities. For Participant G, she manages context collapse between her conflicting academic roles as a graduate student and secondary school administrator:

*Participant G*: Not only am I a full time student, but I'm a full time administrator. I'm very aware that there are parents, community members, students, other schools, that are following my account and they see me as that figurehead that represents education. So I have to be careful with that.

*Participant G* also highlights how she navigates her digital identity with personal expression, separate from her academic identity. The scroll-back method observation of her Twitter profiles had an overarching theme of approaching it from an academic or professional identity. Yet, throughout scrolling through her profiles, there were also moments of personal expression through the use of memes and sharing quotes:

*Participant G*: I do go back and forth with being about school, then sometimes I'll put something that's funny, people can relate to, or anything that shows gratitude.

### ***Participant B***

*Participant B* manages the context collapse between his academic roles as a graduate student and faculty member of his higher education institution. Due to these roles, he acknowledges specific influences on his navigational decisions:

*Participant B*: I have this role amongst a small group of people where there is a certain leadership that I have to take up inside of that community when it comes to things that are about that community ... I still work for an employer, so I would spend a lot of time thinking about posting something that could negatively represent the institution.

During the scroll-back method observations, *Participant B*'s Twitter profile displays a combination of his academic identities and his interests, hobbies, and personal relationships with others. When directly asked about his navigational decisions, *Participant B* highlights his large Twitter following at over twelve-thousand followers, commenting on the overlap of audiences on one SNS. Specifically, due to this context collapse, how he navigates his digital identity occurs by him engaging with various individuals openly on SNSs rather than through the private messaging options of the platforms:

*Participant B*: I know that there are certain things that I post that fit different parts of the audience. But I'll usually tag them. But they're done in the open, I guess. So they're also about tailoring the brand as well, right?

Participants have varying perceptions and experiences regarding their digital identity in the context of their offline academic and personal identities. The construction of their digital identity as emerging scholars and SNS users for personal expression creates a unique opportunity for them to choose which identities to include or exclude in presenting themselves in the digital environment. When participants deliberately separate their academic and personal identities, they engage in behaviours that contribute to impression management and audience segregation as a way to navigate the occurrence of context collapse. Contrary, other participants navigating their



digital identity took a more blended approach, engaging in behaviours that helped manage the context collapse of their differing roles, interests, values, and such.

Furthermore, Twitter and Instagram hold differing network capacities. Twitter is a predominantly text-based platform where individuals express their digital identities in Tweets comprising 280 characters or less. Instagram is a primary visual representation of images posted to a user's feed or story. These main differences in the platforms are reflected through participants' navigational approaches and established connections, as users rarely engage in the same ways on differing SNSs. One participant, in particular, acknowledges the differing ways she performs her digital identity on various SNSs:

*Participant E:* I have a LinkedIn account and stuff. Obviously that, versus my Instagram, are two very different ways that I interact with people... and very different people that I interact with as well.

However, Twitter and Instagram are built on the networked capacity where an individual does not have to friend or follow someone to see their posts if their profile is public, the use of hashtags amplifies visibility to viewers outside of their follower count, and there is a tradition of shaping discourse through engaging with others in public replies and comments. Due to these aspects of the platforms, the implications result in participants shaping their digital identity navigational approaches in alignment with navigating context collapse and are heavily influenced by external sources such as society, culture, and communities.

### **Social Influence**

The third category of description is social influence, a term I decided upon after examining participant responses for the assimilation of cultural and societal norms in their thoughts and behaviours when navigating their digital identity. It pertains to the social influence shaping participants' navigational approaches through behaviours and perceptions. Social

influence connects to the key research question as it provides insight into how individuals are not only concerned with achieving self-fulfillment with their SNS profiles but also assimilating to cultural and societal norms and accomplishing this by navigating their digital identity under the influence of digital viewers. According to Dyson (2012), one of the most significant ways the Internet and social media influence the world is due to the changing balance of power between individual users and institutions.

When ordered logically, social influence is more of an external navigational influence than self-fulfillment or navigating based on the context collapse of academic and personal identities. The participants recall their experiences, beliefs, thoughts, and opinions regarding how their navigational approaches were influenced by societal expectations, norms, and potential audience judgement and perceptions of their digital identity presentation. From these variations of experiences and perceptions, I then created the category of social influence.

Several participants provided detailed experiences about their perceptions and experiences with social influence on SNS, such as posting specific content similar to others, carefully selecting their audiences and responses, and avoiding posting personal opinions altogether. Participants also indicated a level of social influence in their navigational approaches when referencing overt social norms and expectations – such as remaining cordial and professional as not to poorly reflect on their employer or academic institution or expressing hesitation in displaying too much of their personal lives as they are apprehensive about their image being perceived wrongly or negatively.

Kelman's (1958) social identity theory provides insight into how individuals form their sense of self and personal identity based on their membership in social groups and how these group identities can influence attitudes and behaviours towards others. Kelman (1958) proposes

the social influence theory to explain how other individuals influence an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and ensuing actions through compliance, identification, and internalization. The first process is compliance, which occurs when individuals accept the social influence to either gain approval or evade disapproval (Kelman, 1958). In this thesis, compliance refers to participants internalizing the expected norms of graduate students insinuated by the hidden curriculum and social imaginary of higher education institutions (Jackson, 1968; Sartre, 1972; Calarco, 2020). Thus, many individuals in this study commented about consciously navigating their digital identity so as not to receive adverse reactions or disapproval from others or reflect poorly on themselves or their academic identities.

Participants' digital identity performativity is heavily influenced by their relation to other members of society (i.e., their family, friends, coworkers, peers, higher education institution members, etcetera). These relations result in compliance, an implication that occurs when an individual accepts influence and alters their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours because they perceive the rewards or punishments of the influence to be in their best interest (Wrench, Punyanunt-Carter, & Thweatt, 2022). Participants displayed variation in experience through their perceptions about how their content is perceived by audiences, their personal feelings, and how the type of person they are is evident in their navigational approaches.

### ***Participant A***

For *Participant A*, she acknowledges how, regardless of what content she is posting during the curation of her digital identity, viewers will form their own opinions and beliefs regarding her and her content:

*Participant A*: Sometimes, I realize that it isn't even just my message. It's how it's perceived, which is not always in a positive light. And even though I still believe in what I say, I do feel badly if I'm perceived incorrectly. That bothers me.

Therefore, she practices a level of compliance with socially accepted visual representations of her life on Instagram. She directly mentions aiming to present a neutral digital identity, as past experiences where she did not comply with the norms and overall approaches of others on SNSs led to more intense digital engagement:

*Participant A:* I draw a line and I'm like, OK, I'm just gonna stay on what I think is fairly neutral territory. Things that I could easily defend that I'm OK with people knowing about me ... A couple of times I've not really held back. I believe in what I said and I would still stand by it, but sometimes you don't realize you're about to create this whole storm of commentary and sometimes I'm not sure if it's worth it after the fact, right?

Due to this conscious understanding, she approaches her digital identity in a way that encapsulates her social life: hanging out with friends, family, and her partner. From the scroll-back method observations, these aspects of her life are indicated to viewers. When asked directly about the social influence contributing to her digital identity navigation, she states:

*Participant A:* We all want to demonstrate the best of ourselves, but most of mine is just fun. It's social and family. Family is huge to me and my friends are huge, so those are probably my biggest influences. My relationship with family and friends, it's definitely what you would probably pick up from my social media.

### ***Participant C***

Similarly, *Participant C* considers the changing nature of how others view SNS profiles, recognizing that it has become more frequent to perceive and analyze others on the platforms over the years. Due to this, she consciously considers how others' perceptions of her digital identity influence her approach to navigating her digital identity:

*Participant C:* I definitely do think about how people are perceiving my things? Because perception and analyzing people's social media content has increased over the years.

However, when asked about whether or not her consideration of viewers' potential scrutiny and opinions led her to conform to similar ways of digital identity presentation as others on the platform, she noted how her overall approach results in a level of comfortableness sometimes to highlight more controversial things:

*Participant C* [referencing her Instagram post about a climate-strike, taken from the scroll-back method]: It's comfortable to have an account where I'm not posting my own face. I tend to share a lot of things on Instagram that are monumental to me at times. I wanted to capture that and immortalize it on social media. And the same with Black Lives Matter.

### ***Participant E***

*Participant E* highlights how the actions of others' digital identity presentation provide her with a sense of comfortability as she can conform to similar approaches without feeling as if she is the only one doing so:

*Participant E*: I think it actually makes me feel better that other people are posting because I'm like, I want to share this, but I'm the type of sensitive person that I just never want to be construed as like a boasting kind of person. I actually feel better that other people post because then it makes me feel like, OK, I'm not narcissistic or anything like that. It's just a thing that a lot of people post.

Participant E's digital identity seems to take a primarily social identity approach during the scroll-back observation method for her Instagram profile. A few posts highlight her academic identity by specifically highlighting achievements such as graduations, which align with her self-report, as these types of posts are common across others' digital identity presentations. Graduation is a personal and academic achievement for various individuals involved in education. Therefore, even if their digital identity mainly represents their personal expression and social life, they will include posts that present their experience. When asked specifically

about how she felt leading up to posting these types of presentations of self on her Instagram account, she states:

*Participant E:* I feel like so many people like post a graduation photos, I didn't really think twice.

Participants also indicated that their digital identity navigation was often based on fostering and maintaining relationships with others on SNSs and in their institutions. Each participant's response exhibited the variation in the experience of fostering and maintaining relationships with others on SNSs and in their institutions by recounting personal experiences and acknowledging their personal thought processes. This pattern aligns with the second process, identification, which individuals engage in when they hope to establish desired and valuable relationships (Kelman, 1958) through conforming their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Wrench, Punyanunt-Carter, & Thweatt, 2022). It relates to Goffman's (1959) performative theory as it highlights the importance of understanding how individuals present themselves in social interactions and the strategies they use to maintain their image and reputation.

### ***Participant A***

*Participant A* recognizes that her goal of maintaining a neutral approach and relationships on SNSs can be achieved by presenting her digital identity and avoiding engaging in controversial subjects. By doing so, she aims to maintain relationships with others by avoiding conflict:

*Participant A:* If I can't be part of the solution by having an intelligent discussion about a topic, I just bow out. Probably cause I've done it before... I have engaged, and I realized after yes, I shared my post. Maybe some people saw it and felt good about what they read. But in the end, did I change anything? No. Just people that agreed with me continue to agree with me. People who don't, continue not too. I try to evaluate things. If I can't help, I will try not to engage. It's just too much frustration.

This self-report aligns with the scroll-back method observations of her Instagram account, which presents a socially influenced approach to her digital identity.

However, *Participant A* also included her Twitter account for observation despite only sometimes actively building her digital identity on that SNS. When observing this representation of her digital identity, one Twitter post, in particular, addressed the controversial January 6th Capitol attack in the United States. This topic saw a significant divide on SNSs, with numerous individuals expressing their particular beliefs and conflicting views. She decided to join the conversation using her digital identity to reflect her emotions and beliefs on the topic, regardless of the controversy surrounding it:

*Participant A:* In this case I was so emotional. I was angry. I did want my opinion known. I had no reservation. I was angry and willing to defend that anger ... It's controversial. I knew it was controversial. But I was willing to be controversial ... I was part of the noise ... This me and this is how I feel today.

### ***Participant B***

*Participant B* deeply considers how his digital identity navigation appears to others with whom he has built connections. Not only his personal connections, such as his family and partner, but also his professional and academic connections, such as the intuition he studies as a graduate student and works at as faculty.

*Participant B:* I'm always thinking, like, how would my mom feel if she read this? I'm always thinking like, what would my partner think if she saw this? ... The way you represent yourself for your school or for your profession or whatever is important.

Based on the observations made during the scroll-back method of his Twitter profile, *Participant B's* blended approach to upholding his academic, professional, and personal identities in one digital identity presented on an SNS is evident through the various content he

posts and engages with on the platform. Furthermore, he recognizes how his position in society as a “middle-class old white dude” contributes to a sense of “pro-social” responsibility to present his digital identity in a way that acknowledges and uses that position in the context of developing desired and valuable relationships with others on SNSs:

*Participant B:* Certainly in the last four or five years, the performativity has come to include the recognition that I am a middle class old white dude and have some responsibility to shape that identity in a way that recognizes that, and uses that voice, in ways that I think of as pro social.

In discussion, he suggests how this position allows him to perform a certain version of the best person he can be, as his privilege allows him to comment on subjects that others may avoid engaging with:

*Participant B:* [referencing a screen capture about systemic racism in Canada from Toronto police officers] I'm allowed to say that all I want, and nobody's gonna come after me. And nobody's gonna flame me. And I'm not gonna get doxed or whatever. Cause, old white dude. So I'm allowed to talk this way. That's definitely a part of how I use social media.

### ***Participant G***

Similarly, *Participant G* acknowledges how both her professional role as an administrator, and her generational positioning allow her to recognize how social, cultural, and societal factors influence SNSs and digital identity:

*Participant G:* In a way, social media is my job security. The amount that students are in my office and getting in trouble for their identity online and their interactions has highly increased than when I was in school.

Due to this, she can recognize how navigating her digital identity with the intent to model an ideal version of digital identity presentation contributes to establishing and furthering valuable



relationships with her students. It also provides her with an opportunity to ensure her digital identity navigation is approached with an unproblematic ideal so as not to appear hypocritical:

*Participant G:* I know when they're [younger generation] following me that I'm modeling it, and so I'm conscious of what I post. Otherwise I'm hypocrite.

### ***Participant C***

For *Participant C*, the catalyst for her establishing her digital identity on Twitter stems from wanting to assimilate into the academic community of the SNS. Noting how Twitter serves as a space for numerous academics to engage with each other while also sharing their thoughts and work, *Participant C* states:

*Participant C:* Twitter is like an academics playground. There's just so many people, a lot of academics just engage there, which is why I started Twitter. I was never a huge fan of Twitter because of the character limit. But then when I saw how there was so many people, including scholars, actively engaging. I was like, yeah, I definitely want to be part of that community.

Based on the observations made from the scroll-back method of her Twitter profile, she presents a highly academic-focused digital identity, as most of her posts reflect her academic achievements, interests, and connections in the community. However, *Participant C* does recognize how other academia-centric individuals feel about participating in the Twitter community. This recognition highlights insight into how others experience the navigation of their digital identity while trying to establish desired and valuable relationships:

*Participant C:* Whenever I talk to friends, especially in academia, some of them have said they don't wanna go on Twitter because they feel like they don't have enough to share, they don't have enough publications or achievements. It just feels like everyone's just posting their achievements, especially on LinkedIn and Twitter, so they don't feel like they're good enough sometimes.

Regarding performativity, participants acknowledged their conscious decisions while navigating their digital identity, which reflects embracing the social influences as they are similar to the individual's beliefs and values. The varying levels of embracing social influences similar to their own beliefs and values highlighted the variation in experience by participants. Participants expressed personal stories with varying levels of consciousness regarding performativity. These decisions align with the third process: internalization (Kelman, 1958), which occurs when an individual alters their perceptions and behaviours as it is intrinsically rewarding and coincides with their values and beliefs (Wrench, Punyanunt-Carter, & Thweatt, 2022).

### ***Participant F***

When discussing digital identity navigation, *Participant F* notes that individuals may be negatively represented by their posts on SNSs. From her perspective, an influx of negative posts from other SNS users can lead her to feel levels of judgement towards them and their digital identity presentation:

*Participant F:* Sometimes I see too many social media posts that are negative. And I don't mean to, but if I see too many posts from those student with negative messages it will influence my thoughts, my judgment about that student.

Therefore, she consciously refrains from posting worrisome, negative posts on her SNS profiles. In avoiding content that may concern viewers, especially her foreign family, as she lives in Canada for her graduate studies, she alters her perceptions and behaviours about her difficulties and challenges as an international student. She is cautious not to post any content that could negatively portray her constructed digital identity or result in negative emotions from viewers prompted by her digital presentation of self:

*Participant F:* Now I'm living in Canada alone. I have a lot of challenges and difficulties here, but I have never shared that on any social media. I don't want my family to know that because they care about me, so they will be more worried. It's okay for me to deal with it, but I don't let them know. Even for other people [viewers] as well, because I know that those are personal stories and every PhD student, especially international students, face these challenges. I don't want to share those negative feelings on my social media.

### ***Participant G***

*Participant G* experiences similar perceptions to *Participant F* about what she avoids presenting through her digital identity. She specifies avoiding posting anything that may incite worry or negativity from viewers of her SNS profiles:

*Participant G:* You know those people who post things just to get somebody to be like 'are you OK? What's going on? I'm not that person. If anything, there's certain things I won't post because I don't want to invite that type of a response or to worry others. But it's not that I'm doing it because I'm not willing and I'm hiding anything. It's more in a weird way, protecting them from worrying.

Participants have varying perceptions and experiences regarding the social influences affecting their digital identity navigation. For participants, their position in society as a whole – from their family unit, their role as a friend, partner, parent or guardian, their academic personas and professional identity – all affect their navigational approaches to digital identity. Kelman (1958) proposes the idea of social identity salience, which refers to the extent to which an individual's social identity is consciously activated and takes prominence in their self-concept. Kelman (1958) suggests that social identity salience can vary depending on the context and that individuals are more likely to rely on their social identity when they feel that their group membership is being threatened or when they are interacting with members of another group.

## Call Out Culture

The fourth and final category of description derived from participant interviews is call-out culture. Call-out culture refers to "interpersonal confrontations occurring between individuals on social media" (Matei, 2019, para. 4) where individuals are, in essence, told about their public wrong doings in an effort for them to correct their behaviour in alignment with those who are calling them out. Call-out culture's history stems from century-old versions of a tool for marginalized individuals, groups, and their allies to confront injustice and inequity, underpinning limitless social justice movements (Matei, 2019). From call-out culture rose the term 'cancel culture' when people began proposing the cancellation of celebrities for problematic behaviours (Greenspan, 2020). However, as Greenspan (2020) further explains, cancelling has been used colloquially back into the early 2010s, but cancel culture is a recent weaponized term that has become ubiquitous in popular culture to depict cancellations of individuals while also decrying social justice and critical initiatives.

Clark (2020) states that to cancel or call out is an expression of agency and can be situated in Jürgen Habermas' (1962) concept of the public sphere, which is a virtual or imaginary community that does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space but produces opinions and attitudes from the public individuals through rational-critical discourse (Soules, 2007). In the case of this thesis, I situate SNSs as public spheres (Habermas, 1962; Soules, 2007), where graduate students may be recipients of call-out culture for their content and engagement from other SNS users. Therefore, this category connects to the key research question because whether participants expressed concern about perceived risks or challenged the idea of call-out culture through their navigational approaches, it was a reoccurring topic in participant interviews.

Call-out culture is ordered logically after social influence, showing that it occurs on an external level. Participants express concern and weariness regarding the concept of call-out culture being applied to their digital identity, resulting in individualistic navigational approaches to avoid being called out or refraining from posting or engaging with controversial topics. These variations of experiences and perceptions regarding their careful consideration of external perception and judgement from audiences led me to create the category of call-out culture.

Of the seven participants, a few mention their hesitation in posting or engaging with controversial topics on SNSs for fear of how that behaviour may reflect on their digital identity. Several participants share personal stories of observing others experience adverse outcomes due to receiving backlash online that resulted in their cancellation, which can extend beyond the digital environment of an SNS and into their professional and personal lives.

Participants indicate an overt fear of being on the receiving end of call-out culture from other individuals perceiving their social network profiles. When discussing what they engage or refrain from engaging with, participants have various approaches to defending their navigational decisions that displayed the variation in experience:

*Participant D:* I'll continue explaining myself because I'd rather have a full explanation of something than it come back to bite me in the ass later in life. Which it may or may not, but you know, who's to know?

*Participant E:* I am a little more careful about what I post just because I know that there are so many people on Instagram, whereas other platforms like Snapchat, it's really only more intimate friends on my personal Snapchat, so I can post kind of sillier things ... There was an incident with a comment one time where someone commented something on my photo and I had to immediately delete it. I was scared that someone from my school is gonna see this and

misinterpret it as something else, even though I knew totally what they meant and it was harmless. But I just could see it being translated in different ways.

At the same time, participants acknowledge the presence of call-out culture and its potential implications when emotions fuel navigational decisions. Participants voice concerns about the perceived risks of call-out culture and how that shapes their personal approach to digital identity navigation. Participants express variations in experience by holding differing levels of concern and perspective regarding call-out culture as a whole, as well as how their digital identity navigation may result in them being called out or condemned:

*Participant A:* I read tweets occasionally. But it's overwhelming, right? I feel like things just blow up so quickly... I don't directly engage in a lot of that because I do feel like sometimes I just want to step away from the controversy for a minute. And Twitter, I find it very overwhelming. It's always got hot topics. So I'm not doing that to try to segregate my personas. It's just personal. I just find Twitter hurts my brain. I need to take a break from some of that cause it's very noisy, right? People are just so angry.

*Participant B:* There are a lot of things I'll look at now and go, there's no outcome here. Like there's no way that this is going to get any better... So now instead of the rage-y engagement with the person who's mind I can't change, I try to have a softer engagement with more information for that one person who might be coming back later whose mind is not set yet.

*Participant G:* I have the conversation on a regular basis with my students about their identity and the way that they are perceived and the way that that could hurt them in their future.

### ***Participant A***

*Participant A* highlights her own approach to avoid participating in call-out culture as a SNS user, noting that she recognizes how participating in overtly controversial subjects may negatively impact her projected digital identity:

*Participant A:* I won't always share or engage in hot topics because I don't think I'm gonna benefit by stating what I feel, and I think I might hurt myself. So sometimes I will back off of overly controversial things. Because I don't want it to limit my opportunities. I don't want someone to read that and think less of me or think that I'm not professional.

Rather than call others out, or engage in contributing to an already tense topic on SNSs, she states that her course of action is to eliminate seeing the posts directly:

*Participant A:* I will unfollow people that upset me. If somebody says something I'm grossly against I'm not even gonna engage and try to challenge them because I know that I'm not gonna change them.

From a generational lens, she acknowledges the pressures of the instantaneous influx of news and commentary from the digital identity performance of other SNS users:

*Participant A:* I've got friends that, again in more my generational category, talk about how different this is to not just get all this news instantly, but also people's response to news. It's just instantaneous. You know everyone's opinion, but not how to navigate that.

*Participant A* also provides a suggestion on how to navigate call-out culture while navigating the presentation of one's digital identity through engaging in awareness regarding digital footprints:

*Participant A:* You can't go back and fully filter, so you have to be aware. If you're gonna post it, be committed to it because you may have to defend it at some point ... It's basically permanent.

### ***Participant F***

*Participant F's* sentiment about being unable to go back and fully filter older posts and digital identity presentations indicates a struggle that other participants also must navigate. *Participant F* reflects on her choices to create new SNS profiles that serve as her

central digital identity representation, specifically due to the ways her digital identity navigational approaches have evolved over time:

*Participant F:* Since I started to use this new account, I am more conscious about what I post, what I share, than with the previous account. Maybe because the old one was [used] when I was a teenager, so I posted everything there ... Like whenever I felt bad. Or very personal, unrelated stories. I posted everything there and I used that for a long time. I don't want people to read those posts because they happened a very long time ago. So I decided to delete that account and create a new one. People will interpret the story in totally different ways, and not always in the way that identifies us.

The term 'digital footprint' refers to the active and passive data trail left by internet users (Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, 2022). It is also essential to consider what exactly that data is made up of. For long-time Internet users, it is difficult to trace back all the digital engagements and profiles they have created and interacted with over the years. Some moments can be deleted, but unable to gauge the potential reach it had to viewers prior to deletion, there is no way to confidently state that it does not affect one's digital identity.

### ***Participant C***

*Participant C* acknowledges the wariness of being a recipient of call-out culture as an emerging academic. She notes that she deliberately deleted an older, “cringy” account that may contrast with the performance of her contemporary academic identity she now presents on Twitter:

*Participant C:* Twitter is definitely more professional, more academic. I used to have another Twitter account, then I deleted it because I had too many tweets on it and it was very cringe to me ... I'm gonna be graduating soon. I'll be entering academia. I don't want someone to go back on my Twitter posts and be like, oh, what was she doing?



This approach is similar to the navigational approach of *Participant F*. However, *Participant C* acknowledges that concerning the SNS Twitter, she has taken a deliberate digital identity approach from the creation of her profile:

*Participant C*: I wanna make sure I'm creating that professional profile from the get go. That's why I'm mostly engaged academically or professionally on Twitter.

### ***Participant G***

Due to the context collapse that *Participant G* faces between her graduate student identity, professional institutional identity, and professional public identity, she recognizes a particular level of consciousness about how others may view and react to her engagements on SNSs. This awareness results in a more reserved performance of digital identity to avoid implications for not only her digital identity but all her facets of identity:

*Participant G*: I'm very conscious of [how my engagement may be perceived by others] and that is actually why I often do not reply to many posts, depending on who follows those accounts and the ways that they could interpret things.

However, she also recognizes that while her academic institution and employers have so far approved her reserved navigational approaches to her digital identity, she hopes to be held responsible for anything that may not be deemed acceptable:

*Participant G*: I don't think that I've ever posted anything that my university or the school board that I work for would not be okay with. And if I have, someone should call me out.

### ***Participant B***

In a similar role, *Participant B*'s experience as both a professional academic (faculty position) and a current graduate student led him to navigate the context collapse of those roles. In this participant's experience, he believes the style of engagement that he uses on social media led to his dismissal of him by his Ph.D. supervisor:

*Participant B:* The conflict of me being a grad student led to me losing my supervisor through social media, I believe. As a professional, I have that micro celebrity following. And so, because of that, I perform publicly, as somebody who is an ‘expert’. Unfortunately, I happened to perform publicly with my supervisor with that expert tone, and not with my graduate student tone. So I interacted with them the way I would interact with any other expert ... [which resulted in] that person has never spoken to me since. Never told me why they ghosted me, or why they decided they didn't want to be my supervisor or anything.

This participant, in particular, has the largest number of Twitter followers, reaching over twelve-thousand individuals and potentially thousands more, as his profile is public and can be observed by various others, regardless of whether they follow him or not or even have a Twitter account themselves. In one particular instance, he recalls a call-out culture experience while navigating his digital identity that led to a significant amount of push-back from viewers of his SNS post:

*Participant B:* Talking about academic integrity, I referenced somebody in that field in a professionally disparaging way ... but I criticized the work that they were doing. I got endless streams of [people] coming back at me, telling me I didn't know what I was talking about, and I was a terrible person.

### ***Participant E***

*Participant E* highlights this public aspect of engagement, alluding to how the size of one’s follower count and the publicness of one’s profile and engagements impact call-out culture and call-out risk. Referencing Instagram in particular, as she does not use Twitter, she notes how Instagram causes her wariness about how others can see what she is doing and saying on the SNS, resulting in a performative approach in order to avoid potentially being called out:

*Participant E*: Instagram is a little more public than other platforms. So even if I comment on someone else's photo, their X amount of followers can see that comment ... So I am a little more careful about what I post just because I know that there are so many people on Instagram.

### ***Participant D***

Regarding wariness about being on the receiving end of call-out culture, *Participant D* emphasizes an intense aversion to offending potential viewers. *Participant D* focuses specifically on feeling as if there is a cultural pressure or social responsibility not to upset other SNS users:

*Participant D*: It almost feels like there's a social responsibility on people not to trigger other people. When, I think it was Ricky Gervais, said 'how privileged do you think you are that you deserve go throughout life without ever being offended?' It's not everyone else's responsibility for your triggers. It's your own responsibility. You should know to leave, or if you see it, go in a different direction. You should know to stop engaging with whatever it is

When asked how this wariness and perception influence his digital identity navigation, he recognizes the opportunities to open himself up to call out risks stemming from the vastness of public digital identities:

*Participant D*: I know that with [my digital identity] open for everyone to see, you don't wanna say anything that'll trigger anyone. It's like the less personal direct interaction I get with a post, the better.

However, *Participant D's* unique approach to navigating his digital identity around call-out culture differs from other participants. Each time he posts content, his approach is to remain overtly unproblematic, focusing primarily on his relationship with his partner and their life together. He takes a different approach when engaging with others and their posts and comments on SNSs:

*Participant D:* I try to not post anything controversial, but as for the comments, it's not that I try to stay away from the triggering things ... The only posts I really interact with are more controversial to me specifically. If people are trying to spread fact, but it's something that they see as fact that's more opinion based and basically the exact opposite view of me. I like to chime in because when I see everyone in the comments only agreeing with the post and it's reasoning, ignoring the obvious or slight flaws, I do like to try to throw another voice of reason in there.

Participants navigate their digital identity around the concept of call-out culture based on generational perspectives, evolving navigational approaches from when they first began using SNSs, wariness due to the public nature of SNSs extending their digital identity outreach, and allowing for the possibility of being on the receiving end of call-out culture. The permanence of digital identity, positioned as one's digital footprint (Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, 2022), results in implications when individuals evolve as people and their old performances of self that their digital identities expressed may not align with their new approaches. Due to Twitter and Instagram being built on the networked capacity of public profiles visible to non-followers, hashtags amplifying visibility to all SNS users, and the tradition of communication occurring through public engagement, individuals must remain attentive to their projected digital identity if they wish to avoid being a recipient of call-out culture. Furthermore, call-out risks heighten for SNS users with aspects such as significant follower size, public profiles over privatized, and complex context collapse of various roles.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how higher education scholars at a graduate level perceive and experience their navigation of digital identity on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression, in the context of performativity. A main goal of this research is to contribute to existing conversations and literature on digital identity navigation, explicitly focusing on the navigation of digital identity resulting in context collapse and performativity by graduate students engaging in SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression.

Identity in a digital environment, such as SNSs, is continually happening – available to users and viewers even when we are not actively making or engaging with content, posts, or the platforms (Cover, 2015; Sunde, 2022). boyd (2001) claims that “social interaction is a negotiation of identities between people in a given environment” (p. 11). With the ubiquitous adoption of SNS into society, the digital environment becomes a space to present and display digital identities. Digital social interactions occur over SNSs that collapse the context for users, leading to a presentation and performance of oneself that exposes differences in “paradigms of use, interpersonal expectations, and social norms” (boyd, 2001, p. 12). Due to the collapse of differing audiences into one digital environment, graduate students navigate their digital identity through performative acts and impression management (Goffman, 1959) in the presentation of their academic identity and personal identity.

In this research study, the seven participants interviewed were all current graduate students from Ontario, Canada. Each participant provided their SNS handles for Twitter and or Instagram and participated in a semi-structured interview to share their perceptions and experiences as graduate students navigating their digital identity.

As a researcher, using phenomenography allowed me to make sense of the phenomenon of performativity and investigate how it occurs in the participants' lived experiences. I was able to do so by focusing specifically on the variations of experience for digital identity navigation by each participant. I gained insight into the perceptions and experiences of graduate students and how that translated into the navigational approaches and decisions for presenting their digital identity.

When planning this research study, I used my personal experience as a Gen Z graduate student and my curiosity as a researcher to develop the key research question.

The key research question guiding this study was: How do graduate students pursuing higher education use their perceptions and experiences to navigate their digital identity on SNSs in relation to being both emerging scholars and social network participants?

Before conducting the data collection and analysis portions of this research study, I had three anticipations about what this research may discover, based on what existing literature stated and my personal experiences as a graduate student and SNS user. They were concerned with (1) how graduate students would position their digital identities in alignment with either their academic or personal identity, (2) why participants behaved distinctly for their digital identity in opposition to their academic identity, and (3) the cultural, societal, and social influences impacting graduate students.

Prior to this research, I anticipated graduate students who positioned their digital identities in alignment with a scholarly online presence might do so to reflect their expected academic and professional behaviour by their institution. Contrarily, graduate students who position their digital identities in alignment with utilizing SNSs for personal use may avoid any ties to their institution, peers, or position in higher education.

The second anticipation of this research was that individuals might form distinct digital identities based on techno-cultural (Penley & Ross, 1991) signifiers and factors because a person may not behave in the same manner around their colleagues, peers, or supervisors as they would around their family, friends, or partners, even in digital contexts. Absolute professionalism and mannerisms have become ingrained into our perceptions of behaviour, leading us to act accordingly, given the situation and setting in which we are involved (Davis, 2016). Navigation of digital identity occurs when interactions expected of graduate students in an academic environment versus the personal interactions and connections commonplace on SNSs take up differing performative subject positions but occur within the same SNS. This assumption aligns with boyd's (2013) term context collapse, as the author proclaims that SNSs collapse various audiences into single contexts, making it complicated for individuals to use the same techniques online to manage multiplicity in offline interactions. Furthermore, the SNSs individuals use to express identities cause context collapse, which blurs offline and online spaces and results in the intermingling of identities concurrently, eliciting a range of behavioural expectations (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014).

The third anticipation was that graduate students might be influenced by cultural, societal, and social environments and influences as they navigate their digital identity. Graduate students are highly engaged in digital ways of knowing but may grapple with navigating digital

identity performatively when the two approaches are positioned vis-à-vis one another (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013; Salman, 2015; Boté, 2018). This results in need for a deeper exploration into their perceptions and experiences when they position themselves as both emerging scholars and social network participants on the same SNSs.

After collecting and analyzing the data, I realized the first two assumptions I made were adequate in representing the different perspectives and experiences while in search of developing an overall understanding (Farrow et al., 2020) of the phenomenon of performativity. Using existing literature and my personal experiences as a graduate student and SNS user, I assumed that each participant would have similar, yet varying experiences and perceptions based on factors such as which generation they belonged to, what program or discipline they were pursuing, the number of followers they had, as well as audience segregation and impression management (Goffman, 1959). The results allowed me to make sense of the phenomenon of performativity occurring for graduate students as they navigate their digital identity because they brought together contextual factors and highlighted that realities are multiple and socially constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morgan, 2007; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Farrow et al., 2020). This study also provided insight into the cultural, societal, and social environments and influences graduate students experience as they navigate digital identity, therefore supporting my third anticipation.

Yet, this research study still significantly shaped my thinking. Based on the findings, I can postulate that identity is multi-faceted, and the phenomenon of performativity occurs both inside and outside of the digital environment. Digital identity, however, collapses the context of identity offline and online (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013), despite occurring specifically on platforms like SNSs in the digital realm. For most individuals, this blurred boundary of online



and offline representations of self requires deliberate navigational approaches; but for graduate students, the lines blur even further as their academic and personal selves collide (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013; Salman, 2015; Boté, 2018). Based on the study's results, I believe that whether knowingly or unknowingly, based on their navigational approaches, graduate students engage in the phenomenon of performativity when using SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression.

During data analysis, my understanding of the variation of experience and perceptions expressed by participants allowed me to pull four direct categories of description from the data. The categories of description provide four representations of the varied experiences and perceptions described by participants to answer *how* perceptions and experiences influence the navigation of digital identity in graduate students. These four categories were: (1) self-fulfillment; (2) context collapse: academic and personal identities; (3) social influence; and (4) call-out culture, which reoccurred during participant interviews. When logically related (Marton, 1981; Orgill, 2012), the four categories are ordered from internal navigational influences to external navigational influences for participants' digital identity navigation.

### **Self-fulfillment**

Whether it be navigational approaches that participants take to appeal to themselves or others on SNSs, individuals strive for personal fulfillment when posting and engaging with content in the digital environment. The navigation of digital identity by participants of this study indicates the various aspects of individuals' lives, such as career, discipline or program, personality, personal goals and experiences, and social lives, significantly influencing their digital identity presentation. Findings indicate that participants use their hopes, values, and beliefs, such as using the SNSs as a personal record-keeping tool, envisioning themselves as their

target audience when posting content, and being their own motivational factor as ways to reflect how they want to convey their digital identity deliberately.

Based on the findings, context collapse occurs for participants as they attempt to navigate digital identity as emerging scholars in a time where non-academics inherently use SNSs for personal expression. For the emerging scholars of this study, navigating their digital identity relies on decisions about context collapse, such as figuring out if they want their digital identity to represent their offline academic identity in the digital environment, their offline personal and social identity in a digital context, serve as a combination of the two in one digital representation, or for their digital identity to serve as a completely separate digital representation of self. The findings represent the complex layer that context collapse adds to the navigation of one's digital identity, as many participants highlighted their roles outside of being a graduate student, such as being a Registered Nurse, higher education faculty, professional within academia, international student, partner, parent, and friend, as examples. These roles contribute to how individuals wish to be perceived while also signifying that there is a duality to people and overlapping roles comprise their life: no participant is just a graduate student, and no participant is in complete control of who views their digital identity unless engaging in extreme protective measures such as privatizing their account.

According to Marwick and boyd (2011), technology complicates space and place, resulting in the complicated belief that audiences are separate. The vastness of an SNS profile's reach results in a networked capacity of public profiles visible to followers unbound by geographic location, as well as non-followers or users of the platform, as the digital environment allows individuals to seek, engage, and exchange information across physical borders, either in real-time or asynchronously (Lüders, Dinkelberg, & Quayle, 2022). Therefore, even when

engaging in impression management or audience segregation (Goffman, 1959), the participants may be imagining an audience based on cues from the digital environment of the SNS (Marwick & boyd, 2011) that are wholly different from their actual viewers. Thus, the hopes of presenting their digital identity per how they wish to be perceived by their viewers are complex when considering the context collapse occurring in their digital identity navigation.

The findings provide insight into performativity as self-fulfillment pertains to individuals' hopes and behaviours, and actions to achieve them (Self-Fulfillment: Definition & Explanation, 2015). Curating a digital identity becomes a performative act that participants strive to achieve as they manage their digital identity's front-stage (Goffman, 1959) aspect. Findings from this study show that when directly asked about their navigational approaches, participants indicated varying levels of performativity by attempting to curate their digital identity in alignment with how they wish to be perceived (Goffman, 1959). For participants, they acknowledge performativity occurs in their attempts to use their digital identities as an expression of themselves, comprised of personal stories, moments, interactions and engagements, interests, and values.

### **Context Collapse: Academic and Personal Identities**

According to boyd (2001), by adjusting an individual's perception of self in reaction to society and culture, the individual is capable of constructing their identity. This study finds that participants express distinct navigational approaches to their digital identity based on their differing personal experiences, beliefs, thoughts, and opinions regarding their roles as emerging scholars and users of SNSs for personal expression. Findings highlight some individuals presenting a more academic or professional-centred digital identity, some focusing more on a digital identity that represents their expression and personal identity, and some taking a blended

approach that comprises both their academic and personal identities into one digital representation.

However, the context collapse of blending identities or attempting to hold space for differentiating identities under the guise of one digital identity requires a level of performance from individuals as they weigh their navigational approaches. As boyd (2001) states, “context takes on a different role in the digital realm, as does the presentation of one’s identity” (p. 16). Findings show that participants acknowledge context collapse in the context of their digital navigation, indicating that the individuals are aware of its occurrence. However, all have various perceptions and experiences regarding it. For example, *Participant B* acknowledges navigating context collapse through ‘code switching’:

*Participant B:* I have a code switch that's there. I have an identity version that I try to hold to as much as I can. I try to be the best version of that person that I can be.

Conscious cognizance allows for a level of organization to not only monitor their presentation of self but also control what aspects of their identity are presented and open to interpretations and perceptions from others (boyd, 2001). For example, *Participant C* acknowledges her conscious effort to highlight her academic and professional identities over her personal ones, stating:

*Participant C:* I've always kept my personal and professional life separate.

Based on the findings, performativity occurs for these participants when navigating the context collapse of their academic, professional, and personal identities and potential audiences on one SNS. Navigating their digital identity creates a unique opportunity for them to choose which identities to include or exclude in their presentation in the digital environment as they curate their digital identity. In doing so, participants aim to control and manipulate the impressions that others have of them by presenting their 'face,' otherwise known as their self-

image (Goffman, 1959) and, in the context of this thesis, their digital identity. Participants attempted through various strategies to present themselves in a positive light and maintain their face, such as aligning their behaviour with social norms of the SNS, avoiding engagement or controversial behaviours that could be damaging, and using impression management tactics to appeal to specific imagined audiences (Goffman, 1959; Marwick & boyd, 2011). However, this curation does not necessarily protect them from various audiences of differing aspects of their lives – such as work, school, or family – viewing and perceiving their digital identities negatively (Kelman, 1958; boyd, 2001; Marwick & boyd, 2011) and thus highlights the social interaction of ones' digital identity presentation and the perpetually structurally embedded nature of digital identity in SNSs (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Davis, 2016).

### **Social Influence**

Social influence connects to social identity theory as an individual's self-concept is considerably grounded in their association and relation to social groups (Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1975). Social influence is a significant leading factor in the navigational approaches and decisions made by participants of SNSs because participants express varying levels of conformity in order to gain approval or evade disapproval (Kelman, 1958) by accepting the influence and altering their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (Wrench, Punyanunt-Carter, & Thweatt, 2022). Social identity theory provides a framework for understanding the role of social groups in shaping an individual's sense of self and their relationships with others (Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1975).

This study finds that graduate students experience context collapse when their academic and personal social groups blend on an SNS (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013) where they present their digital identity. According to Hogg and Williams (2000), “cognitive-motivational

processes affect, and are affected by, group, intergroup, and societal processes, to make people behave and think about themselves and others in ways that are general characteristics of groups and specifically shaped by the social context.” In this study, participants state their position in society as a leading navigational factor in their digital identity, focusing on their roles within their family unit as a friend, partner, parent or guardian, as well as their academic roles and professional identities contributing to how they present their digital identity.

Findings from this study highlight social influence affecting how participants navigate their digital identity. Since identity encompasses an internal personal identity and a public external social identity, social engagement on SNSs occurs when individuals project aspects of their internal identity into an external identity construction that others perceive (boyd, 2001). This social engagement results in a social performance by the individual for potential viewers where the individual manages impressions (Goffman, 1959) that others may perceive through the presentation of different facets of their identity that align with the social and cultural norms existing on the SNS (boyd, 2001).

### **Call Out Culture**

This study finds that the acknowledgment and wariness of potential implications stemming from call-out culture impact the way participants navigate their digital identity because as they take a performative approach to the presentation of their digital identity, they are mindful of the way it may be perceived both inside and outside of the digital environment. Participants inherently navigate their digital identity around the concept of call-out culture based on generational perspectives, evolving navigational approaches from when they first began using SNSs, wariness due to the public nature of SNSs extending their digital identity outreach, and allowing for the possibility of being on the receiving end of call-out culture. This navigation

aligns with Kelman's (1958) idea of social identity salience, where an individual's social identity is consciously activated and takes prominence in their self-concept when they are at risk of being called out. The contemporary SNS user is both aware of, and pre-emptively reacts to the diverse and differing social environment by managing the multiple facets of their identity (boyd, 2001) on SNSs that mediate connections and engagement through various ways that are dependent on the platform – in this case, Twitter or Instagram, the individual user, and the culture in which they are embedded (Balick, 2023).

Findings represent context collapse through Twitter and Instagram being built on the networked capacity of public profiles visible to non-followers and non-SNS users as public profiles. Thus, the digital identities attached to those profiles are available for all to see. Participants highlight their navigation of context collapse by erring on the side of presenting neutral and unproblematic digital identities. Many participants acknowledge their roles as a graduate student and their personal identity occurring in the same digital environment have having to make deliberate decisions about how to publicly engage with others to avoid call-out culture that could jeopardize any of their identity facets, regardless of them occurring online or offline (Kelman, 1958; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Balick, 2023).

According to Goffman's (1959) performativity theory, individuals engage in 'face-work' to manage their image and maintain their desired face, or reputation, in social interactions. Face-work involves monitoring one's behaviour and the behaviour of others, as well as adjusting one's behaviour in response to feedback and changes in the social context in attempts to avoid "face-threatening acts," which refer to actions or behaviours that challenge or threaten an individual's face or reputation (Goffman, 1959). For example, being criticized or corrected in front of others on SNSs can be a face-threatening act and relates to the acts that occur when one is 'called out'

by viewers (Matei, 2019). This research shows that participants specifically avoid controversial topics and imparting negative digital footprints in attempts to avoid call-out culture and jeopardize their presented digital identity that performs their desired face (Goffman, 1959).

## **Recommendations**

Using the literature review and responses from current graduate students pursuing higher education as a foundational base, I suggest the following recommendations for graduate students as they make considerations regarding the navigation of their digital identity:

*Consider your digital footprint.* Cover (2015) expresses that there has been a considerable shift in thinking about identity, as it was much easier to consider identity represented differently between online and offline spaces during the 2000s to early 2010s. Now, it is common to understand that identity is always online due to the unceasing data traces and trails individuals leave that actively contribute to elements of identity (Cover, 2015). From the posts you engage with to the content you post yourself, you are consistently building a digital footprint that presents your identity – comprised of a performance that represents your online and offline self in one packaged digital identity – and is readily available at all times in the digital realm (Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, 2022).

One of the most significant and reoccurring navigational approaches taken by the participants of this research study is to consider the permanence of what happens in a digital environment and how that permanence applies to their digital identity. Several participants indicated they knew the implicit yet widely understood navigational expectations for SNS users (Jackson, 1968; Sartre, 1972; Giroux & Penna, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Alsubaie, 2015). As Lüders, Dinkelberg, and Quayle (2022) state, the discourse structures of SNSs encompass possibilities for direct and indirect interactions between users, favouring the



construction of contextualized social identities that focus around commonly held attitudes, beliefs, and values. As Balick (2023) states, SNS users are inclined to join like-minded communities within their networks where they are more likely to experience a sense of belonging and safety, using their presented digital identity to connect with others. However, to do so, users must assimilate and learn the implicit rules of the association, often acquired through observation and personal experience (Balick, 2023). Participants of this study indicated these experiences through their digital identity navigation, as they expressed behaviours in alignment with Balick's (2023) understanding of the practice, indicating that individuals will adjust their online expression to keep with the implicit rules of the SNS community they are assimilating to – a strategy understood as “identity performance” (p. 25).

Conversations surrounding the permanence of online actions are often used to get individuals to remain reserved and behave based on the longevity of online engagements and digital identity presentations (Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, 2022; Balick, 2023). However, as various participants described, they are multi-faceted individuals who do not wish to only engage as professional *or* personal beings. Due to this, they take into careful consideration their digital footprint by contemplating how their expression and presentation of self may be perceived by others on SNSs, moderating and performing these behaviours following how they wish to be perceived in what Balick (2023) considers “careful culture.” Careful culture “leaves little room for nuance, complexity, exploration, and dialogue” in the digital environment (Balick, 2023) because the most significant issue with this navigational approach is that regardless of how we attempt to control how others perceive us, it is always possible for other individuals to form opinions that do not align with how we wish to be thought of (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

However, this thesis aims to address these issues by contributing to the conversation on digital identity navigation and the phenomenon of performativity for graduate students.

Considering your digital footprint and how others may perceive it at any time is a meaningful way to hold yourself accountable for portraying the best possible version of yourself to others.

Increasing the introspection of your digital practices and perceptions, navigational approaches and experiences, and the various offline and online factors that influence your overall approach to digital identity presentation can serve as a helpful reputation analysis and encourage a more mindful approach to engagement in the digital age.

*Engage in conversations about digital identity.* Various participants indicated conversations with others about digital identity and the navigational aspects of engaging in digital environments. However, the literature indicates that conversations regarding this topic are only somewhat occurring at the university level (Salman, 2015). The discussion of digital identity amongst SNS users may help raise awareness and comfortableness – especially for graduate students navigating SNS as both emerging scholars and for personal use. By inspiring and encouraging more conversations on the topic, we can work towards direct and transparent communications surrounding the social and societal implied expectations surrounding digital identity navigation (Jackson, 1968; Sartre, 1972; Giroux & Penna, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Alsubaie, 2015). Conversations might result in the whole experience no longer feeling as daunting and uncontrollable (Davis, 2012) since presenting oneself on SNS is incredibly nuanced. Furthering the conversation may change the social culture around avoiding the discussion.

boyd (2001) expresses that individuals should be able to manage and present themselves as they consider appropriate while concurrently perpetuating control over their digital identity

navigation through expression, content, and engagement. As expressed by the graduate students in this study, they acknowledge their ability to manage and present themselves as they deem appropriate on SNSs. However, they often base their digital identity navigation on content, expression, and engagements considered ‘safe,’ such as non-controversial posts that do not reflect poorly on their higher education institution or cause them professional trouble in the future. Therefore, achieving this ability is possible through continuously engaging in conversations about digital identity. It is not enough for graduate students to discuss these navigational approaches and choices with friends and family. These conversations are crucial for graduate students to engage in within their academic institutions, as SNSs continue to blur the offline and online representations of self. Normalization of the discussions can inspire critical conversations, specifically focusing on the navigation of digital identity resulting in context collapse and performativity by graduate students engaging on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression.

*Continuously develop your self-awareness.* Self-awareness is an individual’s ability to perceive and comprehend the aspects that make them unique, such as personality, actions, values, beliefs, emotions, and thoughts (Cherry, 2022). Requiring a level of introspection and reflection, practicing self-awareness entails focused consciousness in two different types: public and private self-awareness (Cherry, 2022). As boyd (2001) states, self-awareness permits individuals to have an awareness of whom they are contextualized within the society and culture they are immersed in.

A meaningful and reoccurring navigational approach taken by the participants of this research study is the practice of self-awareness when engaging in the digital environment. Striving to develop your self-awareness continuously enhances your internal and external

accountability as you make conscious decisions to express yourself. Many participants in this study acknowledge varying degrees of self-awareness that come into play when navigating their digital identity, such as reflecting on the conceptions their engagements and posts might convey about whom they are as an individual or even considering how their identity belongs to not only themselves but also the groups they belong to, such as their professional and academic institutions and friend groups.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Since SNSs are constantly evolving digital spaces, I recommend that future research investigate the navigation of digital identity for graduate students on other platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, or emerging SNSs. The research in this study focused only on Twitter and Instagram, but various other SNSs may provide insightful research opportunities. Expanding this research can provide a greater understanding of how graduate students navigate their digital identity on differing SNSs to give insight into contemporary platforms. In addition, the phenomenon of performativity could be investigated further as it may present differently across various SNSs.

I also recommend that additional research be conducted globally, as this study's research was limited to only participants from Ontario, Canada. Conducting this research with a global lens can widen the participants' demographics while being more inclusive of participants from different continents, countries, and regions. Global research allows data to be analyzed on a deeper level, as the research can explore patterns of similarities and differences across participants' geographical locations and demographics. Although this research did not analyze the data with an intense focus on gender, racial, geographical, or social class differences, some

demographic data was noted, and future research could use that as a guide to expand the analysis into those facets.

## **Conclusion**

The dynamic, diverse, and fluid nature of identity has been an interest of study (Goffman, 1959; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Butler, 1990; Davis, 2016; Boté, 2018) for decades. As technology advances and digital environments form, there is an opportunity to investigate the navigation of digital identity as it occurs on SNSs for individuals involved in both physical and digital spaces. Specifically, for graduate students balancing the performative conflicts and context collapse of graduate student identity with digital identity norms, exploring the context collapse in the digital realm necessitates investigation due to the contemporary nature of the experience.

In the contemporary digital age, graduate students have both an academic identity (Winter, 2009) and a digital identity (Salman, 2015; Boté, 2018). Graduate students experience context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2013) when navigating SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal use. This navigation is based on their perceptions and experiences about how they should display their digital identity. This navigation leads to potentially blending academic and personal identities on one digital site or feeling the need to differentiate the two, leading to navigation of performativity (Goffman, 1959) that is based on individual experience. The task of establishing digital identity can be intimidating when whom it can be shared with is so varied, even on the same platform.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how higher education scholars at a graduate level perceive and experience their navigation of digital identity on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression, in the context of performativity. In making visible how digital identity navigation occurs for graduate students pursuing higher education, this research

study acknowledged and articulated the phenomenon of performativity. Identifying and expressing the phenomenon of performativity concerning digital identity navigation and expression was achieved by presenting and interpreting graduate students' perceptions and experiences on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal use. Particular attentiveness and analysis went into the data collection process to display participants' lived experiences and bring awareness to the phenomenon of performativity while navigating digital identity. The data analysis served as a comprehensive investigation into the experiences, perceptions, emotions, understandings, values, feelings, subjectivities, socio-cultural factors, and other meaningful aspects (Farrow et al., 2020) of the participating graduate students in this study. From participant's detailed and descriptive narratives regarding their navigational approaches to digital identity and current literature, recommendations have been proposed to graduate students as they make considerations regarding the navigation of their digital identity.

The literature review outlined current key research and conversations happening concerning the topic of digital identity and performativity. The literature review approaches the exploration of identity as historically recognized by Goffman (1959), Tajfel (1974), Turner (1975), and Butler (1990) while also including a more contemporary lens from authors such as Cover (2015) and boyd (2001; 2013). The present coverage of academic research shows increasing interest and curiosity regarding digital identity and performativity in higher education. Nevertheless, there is a gap in the literature – particularly research about graduate students in this foci. This research study addresses these gaps in the literature, predominantly focusing on the social practices and perceptions of seven graduate student participants in Ontario, Canada, as they navigate their digital identity on SNSs.

Both performative theory (Goffman, 1959) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) served as foundations for this research to acknowledge and address digital identity navigation and the phenomenon of performativity. These theories provided insight into the psychological and sociological factors contributing to the navigational approaches and decisions of graduate students presenting their digital identities. This study allowed participants the opportunity to express their perceptions and lived experiences about their digital identity navigation on SNSs as both emerging scholars and for personal expression.

Phenomenography allowed me to focus on the perceptions and lived experiences of participants by exploring the many ways this group of graduate students understood and experienced the phenomenon of performativity (Marton, 1986; Ashworth & Lucas, 1998; Åkerlind, 2005; Ornek, 2008; Green & Bowden, 2009). While several participants were familiar with the terminology ‘performativity,’ several others were not – but all participants expressed diverse and descriptive navigational approaches to their digital identity – which highlighted different foci awareness for the phenomenon (Han & Ellis, 2019) through the different ways participants experienced their digital identity on SNSs (Harris, 2015).

The main question guiding this research was: How do graduate students pursuing higher education use their perceptions and experiences to navigate their digital identity on SNSs in relation to being both emerging scholars and social network participants? Various navigational approaches to digital identity presentation were expressed in exploring current graduate students' lived perceptions and experiences. Participants based their digital identity navigation on four factors: (1) self-fulfillment; (2) context collapse: academic and personal identities; (3) social influence; and (4) call-out culture, which are logically related from internal navigational influences to external navigational influences. Findings from this research provide insight into

the perceptions and experiences of seven graduate students as they navigate their digital identity as both emerging scholars and SNS users for personal expression, navigating context collapse. Findings also highlight the phenomenon of performativity occurring for graduate students, bringing awareness to the phenomenon in the context of higher education in the digital age.

Furthermore, this study acknowledges how graduate students exist in transformative roles, where they must not only navigate the implicit behaviours, norms, values, and understandings of graduate school (Desai, Hoffman, & Zibton, n.d), but also the implicit behaviours, norms, values, and understandings of SNSs when constructing and presenting their digital identities. As mentioned, this thesis uses the paradigmatic interpretive method of both constructivism theory forms to understand participants' lived experiences, emotions, feelings, and perceptions (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) regarding graduate students' digital identity navigation. The derived categories of description represent the idea that realities are multiple and socially constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morgan, 2007; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; & Farrow et al., 2020). This thesis also touches on the prevalent social norms in higher education by discussing navigating digital identity influences that result in performativity. The implicit norms of both the hidden curriculum, social imaginary of higher education, and SNSs (Jackson, 1968; Sartre, 1972; Giroux & Penna, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984; Davis, 2016) result in a complex navigational layer for graduate students, especially those belonging to non-privileged and marginalized groups like first-generation and international students. The context collapse of digital identity navigation (Goffman, 1959; Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1975; boyd, 2013) results in graduate students presenting their digital identity performatively to appeal to the dominant social and power structures of SNSs and higher education institutions and may contribute significantly



to outdated and potentially problematic expectations and ideals for graduate students that need to consider the nuances of the contemporary digital age.

This study contributes to understanding digital identity and performativity in higher education, especially among graduate students. A goal of this study is to encourage individuals to pursue the continuation of research on this topic. The provided recommendations for graduate students and suggestions for future research are intended to provide an opportunity to expand on this research and conversation as digital environments continue to evolve.

It is crucial to engage in conversations about the performative nature of digital identity and how performativity is present during the navigational approaches taken in the digital environment, both on an academic and personal level. We must consider how the digital environment and our physical spaces are coalescing to ultimately create a society knowledgeable in digital identity navigational approaches contributing to the phenomenon of performativity.

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[/links/5ad6202baca272fdaf7d91a5/On-the-philosophical-foundations-of-phenomenography.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael-Uljens/publication/321275167_On_the_philosophical_foundations_of_phenomenography/links/5ad6202baca272fdaf7d91a5/On-the-philosophical-foundations-of-phenomenography.pdf)



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## Appendix A: Interview Questions Guide

1. Are you familiar with the phenomenon of performativity?

*If yes, does it influence your approach to how you perceive and experience your digital identity navigation?*

*If no, PI will provide definition, then ask: does it influence your approach to how you perceive and experience digital identity navigation?*

- *Definition: The phenomenon of performativity, stemming from Erving Goffman's pre-postmodern root of performative theory, is ever-present for graduate students in the digital age as they navigate "context collapse" between academic identity and personal identity through the digital identity performed on social networking sites. The term context collapse proclaims that social networking sites collapse various audiences into single contexts, making it complicated for individuals to use the same techniques online to manage multiplicity in offline interactions (Boyd, 2013). Goffman's theory sees "social life primarily as a function of interactions between people, groups, and institutions in particular contexts, and emphasizing the importance of symbols such as language, gestures, appearance" (Squirrell, May 27), through frontstage and backstage performativity, which is applicable to graduate students navigating their digital identity on social networking sites as both emerging scholars and for personal expression.*
2. Whether it be posting your own content or engaging with others' content, are you conscious about how your engagement may be perceived by others? For example: Are you conscious of what you post on Twitter/Instagram or how you reply to other's posts because others may perceive it, either in a positive or negative manner?
  3. What influences your decision about what **to** post/share/engage with on social networking sites and what influences your decision about what **not** to post/share/engage with on social networking sites? Why and why not?
  4. How do you navigate, or wish to ideally navigate, social networking sites as a graduate student? For example, do you keep a separate account for peers and academics separate from one with more personal use such as intimate relationships with friends, family, and partners? Are the ways in which you go about posting content on your social media profiles in alignment with how you wish to be perceived in your institution?
  5. How do you navigate, or wish to ideally navigate, social networking sites for personal expression and use? For example, do you keep a separate account for more personal use such as intimate relationships with friends, families and partners from one with more peers and academics? Are the ways in which you go about posting content on your social media profiles in alignment with how you wish to be perceived in your personal life?
  6. Do you find that you are performing for certain audiences when you post/share/engage with content on social networking sites? Why or why not?
  7. Do you feel as if you base your social network profiles off "model profiles"? For example, this could be profiles that are more curated for academics and professionals, or

profiles that are more for personal expression, or profiles that may be a combination of the two.

8. Do you engage in any sort of audience segregation or impression management when you post/share/engage on social networking sites? For example, this could be engaging with peers and professors on one site but not another, engaging with family and friends on one site but not another using aliases or lack of identifying information and content, or other experiences you may think of.
9. Has your navigational approach changed at all due to an experience or experiences in the past or present that made you conscious of how others observe your digital identity? For example, have you experienced or witnessed other miss out on academic opportunities because of their social networking site profiles? Have you experienced or witness others gain social or business opportunities because of their personal expression on social networking profiles?
10. How often would you say that you participate in discussing your perceptions and experiences about digital identity navigation with others? For example, do you discuss with fellow peers, friends, or family about your perceptions and experiences about digital identity navigation?
11. How would you describe your approach to navigating your digital identity overall? To clarify, do you have a specific thought process before you post content? Do you try to appeal to certain audiences (for example, friends or academic peers) when posting online?
12. Do you think encouraging open discussion on the phenomenon of performativity would be beneficial or irrelevant for graduate students navigating their digital identity in higher education?

*Questions 13-14 based off observations from scroll-back method (ask 1 time per screenshot chosen)*

1. In reference to this artifact: (Twitter or Instagram post), how would you describe the thought process in leading up to posting it? Did you have any reservations or hesitations? Were you hoping to appeal to a specific audience, such as academic peers over friends, or vice versa?
2. In reference to this artifact: (Twitter or Instagram post), would you consider this navigation of the two conflicting in the same space of social networking sites a performative act?

## **Appendix B: Ethics Approval**

Today's Date: June 27, 2022

Principal Investigator: Miss Samantha Ryan Szczyrek

REB Number: 40918

Research Project Title: REB# 22-059: "Navigating Digital Identity as Graduate Students: The Phenomenon of Performativity in Higher Education"

Clearance Date: June 24, 2022

Annual Renewal Date: June 24, 2023

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This is to inform you that the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board (REB), which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans and the University of Windsor Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants, has granted clearance for the ethical acceptability of your research project.

An Annual Renewal/Progress Report must be submitted one (1) year after the clearance date for renewal of the project. The PI may request a modification in the annual report date to align with other annual reporting requirements. The REB may ask for monitoring information at some time during the project's approval period. A Final Report must be submitted at the end of the project to close the file.

During the course of the research, no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol or consent form may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. Approval for modifications to an ongoing study can be requested using a Request to Revise Form.

Investigators must also report promptly to the REB:

a) changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting the conduct of the study;

- b) all adverse and unexpected events that occur to participants;
- c) new information that may affect the risks to the participants or the conduct of the study.

Forms for submissions, notifications, or changes are available on the REB website: [www.uwindsor.ca/reb](http://www.uwindsor.ca/reb). If your data are going to be used for another project, it is necessary to submit a secondary use of data application to the REB.

### **Appendix C: Recruitment Email**

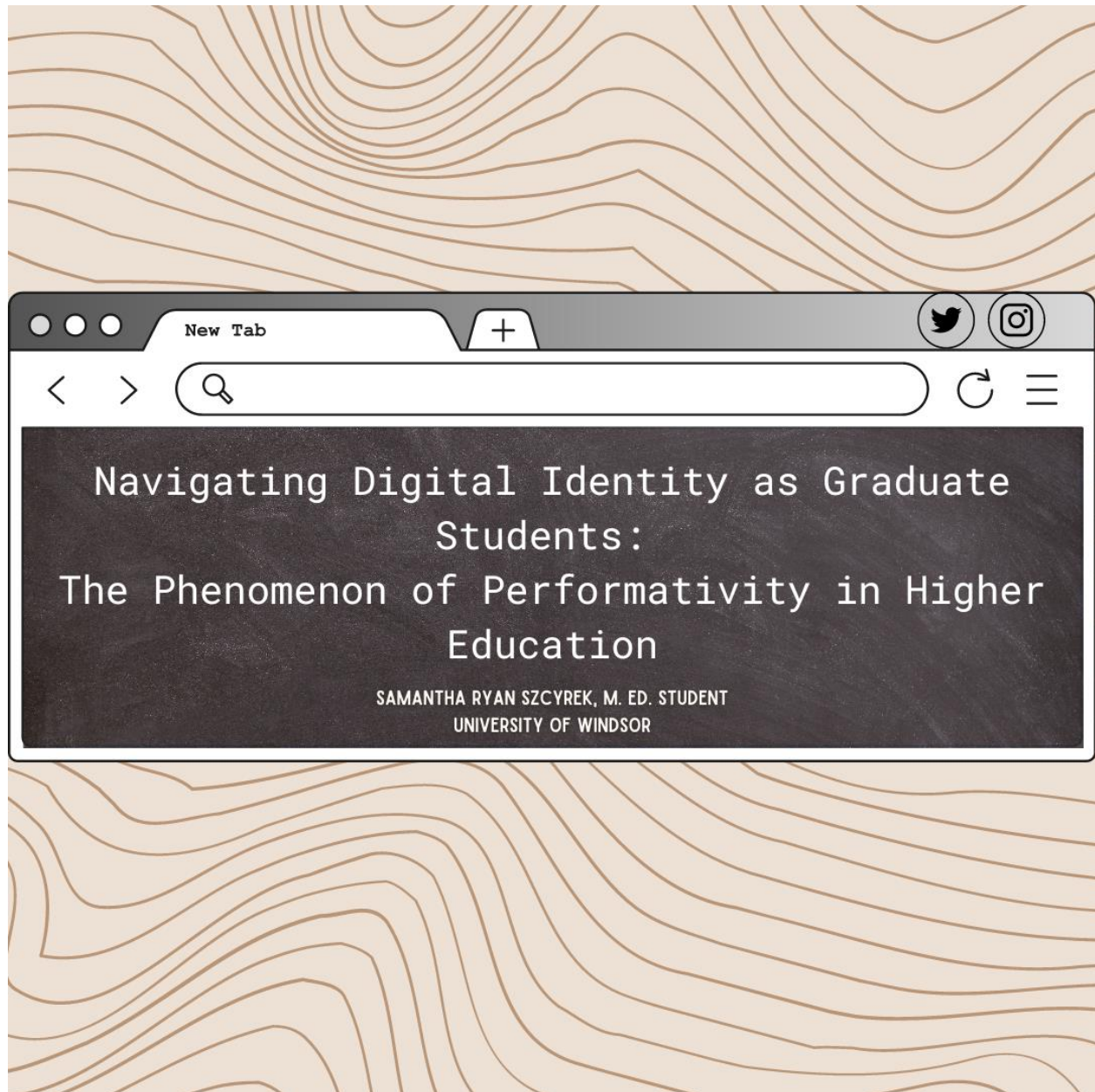
#### **CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS!**

If you're a current graduate student in Ontario, Canada and regularly use Twitter and/or Instagram through public accounts, please send an email to [szcyrek@uwindsor.ca](mailto:szcyrek@uwindsor.ca) or respond to this for more information if you are interested in conducting an interview and having your Twitter and/or Instagram profiles observed. The research has been cleared by the REB at the University of Windsor.

The phenomenon of performativity, stemming from Erving Goffman's (1959) performative theory, is ever-present for graduate students as they navigate "context collapse" (boyd, 2013) between academic identity and personal identity on social networking sites. Social networking sites collapse various audiences into single contexts, making it complicated for individuals to use the same techniques online to manage multiplicity in offline interactions (boyd, 2013). Graduate students navigate their digital identity as both emerging scholars, with formal academic audiences, and as 21st century citizens as performativity is not an act, but an action in which humans exist in a performative world. This research will acknowledge how different graduate students navigate these two conflicting ways of performing identity in the same space.

Interviews and social network profile examination for Navigating Digital Identity as Graduate Students: The Phenomenon of Performativity in Higher Education will be conducted within the next 1-3 months.

**Appendix D: Research Graphics (Call for Participants posted on Twitter and Instagram)***Graphic 1:*

*Graphic 2:*



## Appendix E: Consent Letter to Participate in Research



### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Title of Study:** Navigating Digital Identity as Graduate Students: The Phenomenon of Performativity in Higher Education

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Samantha Szczyrek from the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor. Results will contribute to the researcher's thesis project to fulfil requirements in the Masters of Education program.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact Samantha Szczyrek at [szczyrek@uwindsor.ca](mailto:szczyrek@uwindsor.ca).

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to acknowledge and gather information on how graduate students perceive and experience and perform digital identity. The phenomenon of performativity, stemming from Erving Goffman's (1959) performative theory, is ever-present for graduate students as they navigate "context collapse" (boyd, 2013) between academic identity and personal identity on social networking sites. Social networking sites collapse various audiences into single contexts, making it complicated for individuals to use the same techniques online to manage multiplicity in offline interactions (boyd, 2013). Graduate students navigate their digital identity as both emerging scholars, with formal academic audiences, and as 21st century citizens as performativity is not an act, but an action in which humans exist in a performative world. This research will acknowledge how different graduate students navigate these two conflicting ways of performing identity in the same space.

### PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Provide access to your public Twitter, Instagram, or both, profiles for observation.
2. Complete an interview about how you perceive, experience, and perform digital identity. The interviews can be conducted over Microsoft Teams at the decision of the participant. The interviews will take approximately 30-60 minutes to complete, depending on participant responses.

### POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

At times, you may feel uncomfortable responding to questions about your digital identity navigational practices, as well as your perceptions and experiences that have influenced your digital identity navigation.

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

There are no direct benefits from participating. You may benefit from open discussion and deeper consideration for the navigational approaches you make in performing your digital identity. With more information on the phenomenon of performativity, you may be able to navigate social networking sites with less pressure as both emerging scholars and for personal use. There are no direct benefits to the scientific/scholarly community or society, but this research is intended to raise awareness about the phenomenon of performativity that often goes under addressed in the scholarly community of higher education.

### COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

You will not receive any form of compensation for your participation in this study.

### CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your permission at your discretion. All written records will be securely stored until completion of this research, until January 2024, and then destroyed.

## PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study by letting the investigator know you no longer wish to be a participant at any time during or after the interviews and observations are completed. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so, such as: If your status as a current graduate student ends before 2023, you make your public social networking site profiles private without warning to the investigator via email, or if you do not respond to the follow up consent form after interviews and observations are complete, your involvement may be terminated without regard to your consent.

## FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

A summary of the research will be made available to you through the Leddy Library Scholarship at UWindsor website.

Research results will also be disseminated in the investigator's thesis project and posted on their research Instagram and Twitter accounts.

Web address: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/research-result-summaries/>

Date when results are available: December 01, 2022

## SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

## RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:

The Office of Research Ethics, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; email: [ethics@uwindsor.ca](mailto:ethics@uwindsor.ca)

## SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study *Navigating Digital Identity as Graduate Students: The Phenomenon of Performativity in Higher Education* as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

## CONSENT FOR AUDIO AND OR VIDEO RECORDING

**I consent to the mandatory audio recording of my interview and understand I may request that it be stopped at any time during the recording if I wish to withdraw my participation. ☐**

This research has been cleared by the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

August 3 2022  
Date

**Vita Auctoris**

<b>NAME</b>	Samantha Ryan Szczyrek
<b>PLACE OF BIRTH</b>	Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
<b>YEAR OF BIRTH</b>	1998
<b>EDUCATION</b>	<p>Sandwich Secondary School, Windsor, Ontario</p> <p><i>Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), 2016</i></p> <p>University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario</p> <p><i>Honours Bachelor of Arts (B.A., Hons) Communications, Media, and Film, 2020</i></p> <p>University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario</p> <p><i>Master of Education, Curriculum Studies, M.Ed., 2023</i></p>

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