

I'M NOT WHO I AM: SELF-PRESENTATION IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

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**Title**

I'm Not Who I Say I Am: Self-Presentation in Online Communities

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation was performed with the aim of understanding more about how people interact with and deceive one another in an online context. To build that understanding, the study was motivated by five research questions: (1) How do users experience the process of misrepresenting themselves to others? (2) How do users present themselves in online contexts in which they may not feel comfortable with portraying themselves fully? (3) How do perceived norms and expectations within groups inform users' self-presentations? (4) How do users' perceptions of who will view their information impact self-representation? (5) How do perceived affordances impact how users feel they can engage in deceptive practices? To explore and answer these questions, 27 interviews were conducted via the social networking platform Discord with members of the r/Fantasy server. The findings from the research show that how users perceive the potential audiences they have in a group setting is impacted by what they perceive the affordances of the platform to be. In turn, these perceptions influence what users care to share about themselves and how and if they engage in deceptive practices with other group members, both of which are also motivated by a desire to fit in and be accepted by the group at large. These findings provide insight into how users interact with and deceive one another, but also open up room for future research into the intersection of affordances and audiences and how users modify how they present themselves in relation to those perceived components of the online experience.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen growing concern over polarization in online communication (Newton, 2018). These concerns are animated by the belief that social identity drives how we present ourselves or our ideas online (Green, 2013) and/or that social media platforms operate in a way that encourages antagonism and negative behavior (Kloog, 2017; Uddin, 2017). From trolls sending threats of violence to actors and actresses to writers losing their contracts due to toxicity and violence propagated towards them, these beliefs that users are able to become ‘monsters’ via social media do not at first glance appear to be unfounded. Couple that negative behavior with the fear of being ‘catfished’ – intentionally manipulated into falling in love with a false identity – and the idea of interacting with others online moves from something warranting caution to an activity that can cause legitimate distress and concern (Chen & Lee, 2013).

Much of this concern may also extend from the fact that there are a multitude of different ways in which users can portray themselves online and with other people. These formats of identity exploration and performance can range from simply having a fake name on Facebook to a complete redesign of one’s personality, appearance, and information. With the Internet providing little in terms of concrete forms through which to verify information or suss out scams and bots, users have understandably become wary about who they interact with and how their privacy is being managed (Cobb & Kohno, 2017). In turn, this can and does lead users to hold back information to protect themselves from other users or, at very least, to make many of their interactions go through a vetting process to assure themselves that others can be trusted (Obada-Obieh & Somayaji, 2017).

Beyond users viewing others, however, exploring how users individually see themselves and how they decide how to develop and make use of online versions of themselves can and



should be examined in order to better understand why they behave as they do. This motivation behind using social media in particular ways can be as simple as wanting to boost one's self-esteem (Mehdizadeh, 2010) and as complicated as trying to figure out one's real personality (Van Dijck, 2013). In many of these cases, users are trying to understand who they are through the creation of different identity components – a sort of feeling-out process, so to speak. They may not even necessarily know why they behave a particular way themselves. This searching for an identity, then, can be expressed through how users present themselves online. In particular, in going through the process of understanding their identity online, users may misrepresent or selectively present themselves in specific ways.

While there has been a significant amount of scholarship on self-presentation in online spaces (Donath & boyd, 2004; Gehl, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011; McEwan, 2015; Seitzinger, 2014), less is known about how group norms and technological affordances influence misrepresentation of identity in online communities. As the scope of the Internet and what it allows users to do continues to expand, understanding why and how users make use of the changing technology to serve their purposes becomes critical, as it provides scholars with a better understanding of not only what allows users to present themselves in ways they so choose, but how groups and other users affect that presentation. The current project will explore that intersection of social groups and what technology provides users through the user's perspective, focusing on how and why users choose to and are able to misrepresent themselves in online social contexts.

Deception research has covered a wide range of topics, particularly in online contexts, though in all settings, there are common motivations. Misrepresentation and deception online often are associated with topics such as online dating and matchmaking services, personal

exploration of identity, or concerns about privacy (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hancock, Toma, & Ellison, 2007). In these contexts, users appear to be engaging in misrepresentational behaviors (e.g. posting pictures of themselves from a younger, skinnier time of life) to achieve some kind of positive goal, such as getting a date, learning more about themselves, or simply for the fun of it (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006). In all these contexts, the behaviors being put into play are deceptive in nature or, in other words, “knowingly transmitting messages to a receiver with the intent to foster a false belief or conclusion” (Buller & Burgoon, 1996). Since these messages can be so wide-ranging, using them could consist anything from being secretive about one’s height or weight (perhaps with some ‘fudging’ to appear slightly more palatable to other users) to outright lying about one’s income level or sexual history. For all these deceptions, they are performed in order to allow the receiving party room to believe things that may not be true, with variation on the level of ‘true’.

What is not as commonly explored is how group norms and beliefs about what platforms can do and who can see oneself inform and contribute to how deceptive behavior is performed. Some of these behaviors, then, could even represent users going so far as to deliberately portray themselves as believing or being a way that runs counter to their actual senses of self (Steinel & De Dreu, 2004). An example of this behavior would be portraying oneself on social media as either a fan of a rival’s football team, since potential colleagues or important contacts could have that same sports affiliation. Another would be engaging in praise or condemnation of a media artifact that other group members were discussing and agreeing with their opinions, even if an individual’s opinion differed significantly. One need only look at the social media reactions to *Game of Thrones’* final season to see how that sort of deception could be utilized to maintain or improve social standings or relationships with others. Within deception research, this specific

form of deception is less well-understood, even more so in dealing with online contexts, meaning that there is room to and value in exploring this venue of research.

For this project, the online community Discord provides a valuable case study to explore the questions raised. Discord is a digital-distribution platform – meaning that it provides access to and sale of games, movies, and music – that is facilitated by a ‘chatroom’-style interaction model. These chatrooms – or servers – are modeled after the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) format, created by users and operated by administrators and moderators (typically chosen from the userbase). These servers can be created for any number of purposes, such as sharing memes, providing information for raids on *Pokémon GO*, or simply engaging in discussions about shared interests. This platform is also extremely popular in the video game speed-running communities (based around completing a video game start-to-finish in the shortest amount of time possible), esports communities, and Twitch streaming communities, which has led to Discord quickly becoming a heavily-utilized and user-populated media platform and, thus, a valuable tool through which to conduct research into online communities. Since the servers are typically created and operated with specific interests or communities in mind, those who wish to join and be a part of those communities may feel as if they are compelled to communicate in ways that will maintain their acceptance by the group, including possible misrepresentation of their identity or views.

Discord was selected for this study due to the affordances the platform provides. One of the most interesting components is that of chat persistence. This means that, until a server’s history is cleared or ‘purged’ (to use a server colloquialism), the contents of what was said by whom and when it was said are able to be accessed by anyone who scrolls back through the archives. Anything that is posted could be fact-checked by looking at previously-stated

information given by a user. More specifically, information provided by users can be cross-checked for consistency with previously provided information. Users can also mute or ignore certain channels within the server if they wish to avoid discussion of controversial topics (e.g., political discussion channels).

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

This project seeks a better understanding of how and why people use deceptive behavior online, especially in relation to their social groups and how they present themselves as members of the group. Since deceptive behavior in online environments often involves self-censorship (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Lang & Barton, 2015), one part of this project will involve assessing how and why users of online communities engage in self-censorship via selective untruths, both in terms of their motivations and of the individually-perceived technological features of their online communities. Another component of the project will focus on how they have experienced engaging in that behavior (e.g. untruths) and how they believe they appear within those online communities, especially regarding utilizing those selective untruths in that setting. The last part of the project will consider how users view the affordances of the platforms they use and how those may or may not impact how they interact with others and how they present themselves in those group contexts.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research relevant to this project focuses on deception in online interactions with others, self-presentation in an online context, social identities online, and how technological affordances are perceived within social media platforms. While online deception scholarship is most central to this project, these additional areas of research inform the current study's approach to misrepresentation in online communities. Self-presentation literature helps us understand how and why people portray themselves online in particular ways, while social identity research adds a broader context to individual user's presentations of self. Research into technological affordances directs our attention to how features of the social media platform enable and constrain self-presentation.

### **Deception**

With deception and misrepresentation, much of what is known revolves around how people present themselves to others in ways that are not entirely accurate. This can take place in dating and outside that realm, but the common thread is that there are goals in mind while doing so. However, people want to feel as if they are speaking to someone who is being 'real,' so there is also an emphasis on being 'authentic' and how that can be seen and accepted by others. For this study, understanding why users deceive and in what contexts, especially in terms of balancing being 'authentic' versus achieving personal goals, is important to answering further questions about how. Previous research (Hancock, 2007; Utz, 2005) has shown that users deceive for a myriad of reasons, ranging from trying to be more appealing to a dating interest to trying to fit in with others. In doing so, users rely on others to help support their deception so that they can appear 'authentic.' In all these contexts, users who deceive are trying to accomplish something, which leads to a wide range of 'whys'. Further research has also shown that age,

personality, and gender all can affect the likelihood and type of misrepresentation others engage in (Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010).

What has been lacking, however, is a concrete understanding of how the perception of technology and of audiences interact and how that interaction influences how users deceive others. Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie (2004) found only mixed results from looking at the relationship between media choice and audience in relation to deception practices. In their research, they predicted that specific media choices would lead to particular types of deception (e.g. explanatory lies would be performed via email) but found that these choices were only partially true and, in some cases, did not seem to have an effect. Similarly, in considering the audience, they found that people do deceive different audiences in different ways but did not extend that into whether or not there is much, if any, interaction between the technology and the audience in terms of how it affected deceptive practices.

Previous research has explored factors that influence online deception but have focused on a limited number of channels. Carlson, George, Burgoon, Adkins, & White, (2004) consider how and, to an extent, why users engage in deceptive practices online. They found that users tend to deceive in situations where they feel they can get away with it. The study also found that there are going to be different social cues provided by the media chosen to deceive through, especially in the context of utilizing online media such as email. In another study, Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie (2004) found that the design of technology, such as email, the telephone, or instant messaging, has an effect on deceptive behavior. More specifically, they found that these affordances help to make being deceptive easier while using these technological platforms.

However, while useful in considering deception in online or technologically-based contexts, these studies focus primarily on email, with only a cursory mention of the existence of chat rooms. The affordances of social media bring with them new opportunities for both interaction and deception online. To that end, there is a need to understand how these factors interact as well as how users experience engaging in deceptive practices beyond the telephone/email/etc. level of technology, particularly as these platforms become more ubiquitous and a critical component of how human beings interact with one another in the current technological climate.

Extending the concept of technology affecting deception practices also leads to exploring what may or may not be known about those affordances. For example, Daft & Lengel (1986) and their idea of media richness could apply to deception in that users could utilize richer media – or media with more perceived affordances – to engage in more detailed or planned-out deceptions, while others (Bradner & Mark, 2012; DePaulo, et al., 1996) argue that richer media is worse for deception since it allows users to feel closer to their targets, which can be uncomfortable. In either case, the deceptive practices are put into place because the users believe that the affordances of whatever media platform they choose put them in the best position to deceive effectively, regardless of context. However, in considering these ideas, as well as other studies such as that by Carlson & George (2004), which shows that richness should be positive for deception in that it provides more control over the deception, it also becomes clear that these affordances are a) not being explored *as* affordances and b) that they are not considering how affordances may be perceived and how that can affect what users choose to do. Further, they also are not addressing how affordances – even perceived – could interact with who users believe their audiences are to affect how deception is put into place.

There are different types of deceptive practices that people use. Online manipulation can be similar or the same as offline dating deception practices and also viewed the same way (Hancock, 2007; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008; Zytka, Grandhi, & Jones, 2014). Techniques such as lying or trying to impress potential dates or business contacts are common offline and many of the behaviors are replicated in those contexts as well (DePaulo, et al., 1996; Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1998). As well, DeAndrea, et al. (2012) show how users can produce profiles and ways of interacting with others while having the internal expectation that they will become, in the future, who they are presenting themselves to be. This is called aspirational self-presentation, with the profile serving as a promise of improvement or growth. With that being said, even though users who present in such a way likely do intend to become that person down the line, they are not there yet, meaning it still fits under the umbrella of deception. Regardless, people are looking to connect and resonate with others, even to the point of misrepresenting themselves to do so. However, in many cases, after deceiving, individuals may well feel worse or more distressed and view the interactions they just experienced as being more negative or unpleasant (DePaulo et al., 1996).

Manipulation of one's presentation can also be seen frequently in the context of online dating. Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs (2006) explain how those involved in online dating often present themselves to potential dates in a way designed to appeal as best they can, since that is what is most likely to attract attention. Even more, in building profiles, there will be the use of words and pictures that are designed to meet specific imagined expectations of attractiveness, such as weight, hair color, and other factors that impact whether or not a date occurs (Brym & Lenton, 2001; Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012). This misrepresentation, especially regarding the



attempt to meet specific expectations, occurs in various social contexts (including groups), which means that what could be found in this study could have wider-spread impact.

Users engage in deceptive practices outside of dating contexts as well, though this misrepresentation is also done with a goal in mind. Tactics such as impersonation, content manipulation, and even communication channel manipulation can be used to achieve certain goals outside the realm of relationships (Tsikerdekis & Zeadally, 2014). In these contexts, though, users are still motivated by trying to achieve something, even potentially harmful goals. These goals can even lead to the use of sockpuppets, or alternate accounts designed to deceive others and change what they may believe about the original user (Kumar, Cheng, Leskovec, & Subrahmanian, 2017). This can be seen often in comment sections or in groups where users discuss controversial or divisive issues. In turn, those accounts can create mistrust of actual users within the social groups, whether or not those users engage in that kind of behavior. Essentially, there is always something motivating deception online, those users do not always know what it is. However, while most users do acknowledge that deception and misrepresentation occur in online contexts, they themselves tend to not believe that they do so or that they have fallen for deceptive practices performed by others (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006). Rather, as shown by broader research into deception, people tend to gloss over their own lies/deceit/misrepresentations as those moments are seen as of little consequence and, in many cases, even for the benefit of those with whom the individuals are interacting (DePaulo et al., 1996).

For this project, then, there is a need to expand beyond previous research on how and why users engage in deception. While studies such as those by Utz (2005) and Hancock (2007) seek to explain what motivates users, that research only addresses the internal drive before deceiving, not what occurs after doing so. In looking at this research, it becomes apparent that

there is room to further explore what effects deception may have on the users themselves and how they feel about engaging in that behavior. There are questions that remain, specifically regarding the user experience in deception, such as what made them feel they could or should deceive and how the process impacted them. While there are studies that have considered the impact of deception after the fact (DePaulo et al., 1996), there is likely more to the experience during, before, and after engaging in the deception. This current study progresses past how people felt post-deception and into the realm of how they feel about and look at the experience of deception as a whole. Given that technological concerns are far different from where they were back in 1996, as well as 2019 being a different world in terms of communities and who can interact, it seems important to look at how deception impacts people in this different arena of communication. Considering what comes after being deceptive is important because understanding how being deceptive affects how users feel about themselves and about their place in the community provides insight into how what they choose to do and how to engage is affected by the process of deception itself. As a result, all of these components can affect how communities operate. Understanding these experiences and what lies behind them will allow scholars to consider what motivates users to behave in specific ways, including deception. In framing that exploration in a broader sense, the first RQ emerges:

*RQ1: How do users experience the process of misrepresenting themselves to others?*

### **Self-Presentation and Authenticity**

People are able to present themselves online in different ways depending on context. These contexts allow for users to determine what they choose to put online and who, in theory, gets to see it. This curation, though, may be affected by self-censorship or wanting to avoid offline or online consequences, such as being rejected by others or even suffering professional

damages. For this study, those consequences and the role they play are important in understanding how and why people present as they do.

In both online dating and other social contexts, users want to interact with ‘real people’ and rely on various methods to assure that people are ‘real’ in interactions. ‘Real,’ in this instance, refers to users being able to believe that they are engaging with others in a way that is reflective of who the person is outside of that specific context. This demand for ‘realness’ requires a balancing act when it comes to selective self-presentation, where the need to be seen positively by others is balanced against the need to also be seen as authentic. Marwick & boyd (2011) address the idea of being authentic as something that is of value in online interactions since users have the desire to know that they are interacting with other human beings. Further, authenticity in users can be augmented through verification by other users to ensure that the user is ‘real,’ especially through already-vetted group members (Donath & boyd, 2004; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). If other users vouch for another user’s veracity, groups are more likely to accept the user immediately rather than going through any particular kind of vetting process. This same authenticity and connection with others are also used in connecting with others to achieve goals, especially those requiring recruitment or usage of those social connections (Henderson & Bowley, 2010). What is not clear, however, is how individual users scale back or modify how they present themselves as ‘real people’ in relation to what groups need or want from their userbase, especially in terms of wanting to maintain group relationships or social standings.

The idea of the ‘self’ is also difficult to pinpoint because there are different facets and components that are expressed to reflect that sense of identity in different social contexts. The concept of ‘crystallized self’ challenges the idea that there are real and fake versions of the self.

Instead, it explores the notion that humans curate and present different versions of themselves depending on who they believe they are interacting with (Comello, 2009; McEwan, 2015). Thus, a person may be professional and polite at the office, while they may be more relaxed with their friends. In those contexts, the person engaging in the self-presentation is not being inauthentic or lying about who they are. Rather, the person is presenting who they are in a way that is most appropriate for the setting, be it church, a football game, with grandparents, or with a romantic partner. In each situation, the person is truly being themselves, but the version of the self that best suits where they are, what they are doing, and who they are with (Fortin & Oliver, 2016). Essentially, whatever a person shows others is who they are, at least in that particular context.

Tracy & Tretheway (2005) offer a similar conclusion but go further in exploring the idea that the crystallized selves of people may actually have multiple facets at once, depending on the context, particularly those where people feel more ill-at-ease. As a result, there may be no real way to determine what is the ‘real self’ versus a ‘fake self’ because, at any given time, there may be multiple personality expressions occurring (Michikyan, Dennis, & Subrahmanyam, 2015). In all this, context determines what facet of one’s identity is expressed, but what is unknown is what happens when the context requires or expects an expression that is non-existent or counter to reality, especially in a context where users hope to fit into a group or maintain relationships or even avoid negative repercussions.

People online pick and choose what they show of themselves to the Internet world around them. This expression of different facets of one’s self is extended to online settings through individual choice of presentation. In these settings, users are able to modify what they show the world and different users depending on what they are doing and who they believe they are connecting to at any given time. This idea is referred to as ‘social curation’ (Duh, et al., 2012,

Hall & Zarro, 2012) and it affects how users address identity presentation. By being able to pick and choose what is shown to the online world through posts, Tweets, Snaps, or any other social media artifact, users are, in effect, in charge of their online identities and how those are perceived by others (Seitzinger, 2014). Having the ability to dictate what is posted and, thus, exposed to the public means that a user does have a measure of control over who they appear to be. Similar to crystallization, people are going to provide information as they please. This information could, however, be fabricated (e.g. political views), which connects presentation and curation with the ideas in deception, particularly as it relates to trying to connect with others in larger contexts.

Part of curation is also choosing what not to show or post, for whatever reasons a person chooses. This judicious posting and picking and choosing what is shared with others or not, depending on context, adds more control over presentation. Curation of social artifacts can extend beyond just self-positioning into deciding to share or not specific kinds of posts or media (Hogan, 2010). There cannot be any trouble with other users or employers if certain materials, such as pictures, videos, or opinions, are not shared. That being said, the curation to what is called the ‘lowest common denominator’ of those who may see the account can also be framed in such a way as to act as another layer of privacy in terms of managing what is seen (Vitak, 2012). However, there is also research that shows that users do have concern about being tagged by other users and the impact that has on their privacy (Wang, et al., 2011; Henne, Szongott, & Smith, 2013). This concern and awareness may in turn affect how users perceive their privacy and how they are presented. These concerns about external pressures could prompt self-censorship of personal beliefs, or even misrepresenting those beliefs in light of those pressures.

Self-censorship may be seen as necessary for any number of reasons, ranging from wanting to maintain friendships or social groups or simply avoid situations that could become socially or professionally-treacherous (Sleeper, et al., 2013). Given the propensity of Internet mobs to unleash attacks on social media accounts and even employers in the wake of saying or doing or being something considered disreputable by a large group, that self-censorship is not necessarily unwarranted. This self-censorship results from usage of social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, where there is a growing frequency of the platforms being used to intimidate and shut down opposing opinions and beliefs with threats and intimidation (Huffman, 2016). Specifically, users looking to bully others into silence use such tactics as mobbing (Zapf, 1999; Misawa, 2017; Snow, 2017), in which people pile on abuse and insults to the point where the targeted user feels they must shut down their account. Users may also engage in doxing and releasing personal information to the masses, such as finding out employment information and contacting the workplace directly to demand the target be fired while also spreading this information to similarly-minded users to do the same (Klang, 2016). Stretching all the way back to when Justine Sacco was fired after an ill-chosen joke, the threat of losing one's employment has loomed over online interactions (Trottier, 2017).

However, it is only within the last few years that the threat has been extended beyond merely punishing those who may mis-speak or engage in unsavory or illegal behavior (Sullivan, 2017). Rather, 'your job will hear of this' has now been appropriated for use as a cudgel against anyone who may express beliefs or ideals counter to one's own. As a result, users may self-censor in order to avoid their posts or online presence creating social problems for themselves, even including avoiding any political postings (Das & Kramer, 2013; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Lang & Barton, 2015; Marder, Slade, Houghton, & Archer-Brown (2016). This has, as one

may expect, a considerable chilling effect on online communication (Marder, Joinson, Shankar, & Houghton (2016). Even further, this chilling effect could, especially given the levels of viciousness possible in dealing with identity components, make users feel forced to misidentify or misrepresent themselves to avoid these negative repercussions.

Considering the literature that currently exists, there are some questions that are addressed and some needed answers. First, self-presentation can take on different forms in different contexts, depending on what users believe the situation warrants, but it is unclear how users define the situation and how they determine what the situation requires. Second, there are diverse ways in which users may self-present, but the literature is focused mainly on how people pick and choose what they show in general, rather than how they make these determinations in response to specific situational needs. Finally, self-censorship is discussed as something that people do, especially using curation, but there is little research to show how self-censorship is performed outside of targeting the ‘lowest common denominator’ in a given audience. The second research question, then, asks:

*RQ2: How do users present themselves in online contexts in which they may not feel comfortable with portraying themselves fully?*

### **Social and Community Identities**

Online identity can also be determined by group membership and the norms and values that make up the group’s identity. Users both shape and are shaped by the identity of the group and put themselves and their own ideals into how the group operates. As well, who is believed to have access to users’ lives online changes how identity is performed, though context collapse – where the assumed audience for a social media post is in fact more expansive and potentially-damaging than one originally assumes (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2014;

Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018) – can affect that belief or alter it completely. For this study, how users believe others view them is important in understanding how they choose to present themselves.

Identity online can be and is shaped by the groups in which users participate, particularly regarding to the norms which are followed. Who users are online can be fundamentally grounded in being social through the groups participated in and who users present themselves to be within the context of those specific groups. In looking at groups, the SIDE Model (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1999; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995; Sundar, 2015) explains that participants in online-based organizations tend to ascribe to group norms, beliefs, and behaviors. Within the current study, this theory helps to explain what motivates people to be deceptive, specifically the desire to fit with group norms. The ideas in the SIDE Model also run counter to the idea that anonymity creates a sense of freedom and, as a result, users engage in negative or abusive actions simply because they feel free to act in those ways (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; Hinduja, 2008; Suler, 2004). While users may follow along with group behaviors rather than succumbing to antisocial behaviors allowed by anonymity, that also does not preclude the groups from engaging in that kind of behavior if that is what the members involved decide the group should do. Rather, broader social norms that are removed through the presence of anonymity are instead replaced by social norms within the group proper (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Reicher, Postmes, & Spears, 2005).

However, negative or antisocial behaviors may still exist and be allowed or even encouraged by the group, but there may also be internal group constraints placed on member behavior. These constraints, in turn, may moderate the behavior of those members through norms, though social pressure appears to be a factor (Zhou, 2011). For example, a Discord



channel could allow for frequent swearing or jokes about adult situations but may draw the line at posting not-safe-for-work material such as pornography or other material deemed unacceptable by those within the group while enforcing that line with kicks, bans, or similar shame tactics, such as changing a user's name to pink to signify a failure. If groups have an effect on identity, as shown here, then it also follows that they affect what users choose to present or misrepresent about themselves (e.g. political values more aligned with the group's).

Users also bring parts of their own identities into the group, which can result in different reactions taking place within the group itself, either modifying the group's identity or possibly creating friction. In the first instance, by bringing components of their external identities into a group, users can help shape the direction of the group (Dillon & Bushman, 2015; Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005). This process means that the input of its users can change what is done, how it is done, and how similar actions may be taken in the future (Lea & Spears, 1991). As a result, members create a symbiotic relationship, in a sense, with the groups in which they participate by their helping to shape the group identity while also changing their own personal identities in concert with the actions, beliefs, ideals, and direction of the groups. The group dynamic, then, can be modified based on how users are connected with the group.

However, if the group tends to believe or feel a certain way, then introducing beliefs or opinions counter to the group could stall the group or create conflict as opposed to shifting the identity of the group, conflict which some users may want to avoid. Social Penetration Theory explains how levels of interaction deepen over time as individuals become more comfortable with one another (Altman & Taylor, 1973), a phenomenon that occurs in dyads as well as groups. This sense of comfort could be disrupted by the introduction of a new user that is not up-

to-date on how the group operates. In order to maintain group identity, users may be implicitly or explicitly encouraged to adapt to the norms of the group.

While there are studies detailing how individuals can impact group direction and how groups are shaped through the actions of their members (Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000), there is room for research that considers what impact those group norms, or how they are perceived by users, have on individuals and how people curate their behavior in those groups. If group norms are counter or misaligned with what a user feels or believes, while users do have the ability to influence the direction of the group, it is as of yet unclear how those group norms impact how users present themselves, leading to the third research question.

*RQ3: How do perceived norms and expectations within groups inform users' self-presentations?*

Extending beyond group norms, who people intend to broadcast their thoughts to and who they actually do very well may differ, which in turn can result in self-censored curation. These audiences, or who is able to see who a person is online, play a role in how users are able to define their identities. Users tend to assume that what they post is going to be viewed or engaged with by only a limited number of other users (Marwick & boyd, 2011). These users, in particular, are mainly or entirely those they targeted with the posts, such as friends or colleagues, though this has been argued in recent years, specifically by Blommaert & Szabla (2017) who make the claim that users choose specific people to speak to, rather than audiences in general. However, the idea of context collapse shows that, often, the audiences that are exposed to posts are significantly larger than expected, which can lead to uncomfortable online experiences such as cybervetting or trolling. As a result, users may curate their social media feeds to be appropriate

for specific audiences, or the lowest-common denominator, so to speak (Hogan, 2010). If users are trying to appeal to the widest base of interest, even within groups, it may also make sense that they are going to broadcast information that appeals to the sensibilities of the group, even if inaccurate.

### **Perceived Audiences**

Perceived audiences also influence what facets of themselves users choose to show, which still does not account for context collapse occurring. These audiences differ from group norms in that group norms and expectations of the group are experiential and built through interactions with the group and other members, while perceived audiences are more abstract in that they are built internally, even though there are experiences with others (Litt, 2012).

Essentially, users imagine or perceive their audiences to be a certain way – the group norms can simply help to inform that perception. While part of the social curation strategy (Hogan, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2014) considers the understanding that different people will be privy to different types of information, these audiences are perceived differently, depending on what the users posting material believe the audiences are or could be. This idea of the ‘imagined audience’ means that users may believe they have a specific audience already in place in relation to their social media presences (French & Bazarova, 2017; Litt & Hargitai, 2016; Kim, Lewis, & Watson, 2018). This imagined audience may also include multiple audiences that are approached in specific ways designed to meet presumed expectations of what kind of behavior of what is expected (Murumaa-Mengel, 2017). For example, if a blogger imagines that their audience has a particular political leaning, that person may then tailor the blog and what they write and how they interact with others in relation to how they suppose that particular audience would want or expect that they behave. Since users believe certain people can see what they do, they can tailor

what they do to fit that audience so, within the group context, they may be engaging in that misrepresentation because that is how they see the audience.

However, being unaware of context collapse and the repercussions that can result from it can lead to negative consequences within the lives of users. Even with the imagined audiences in place, there is still the danger of context collapse occurring and spreading posted content beyond expected social boundaries (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2014). When context collapse happens, the intended sense of self-presentation is thrown off-kilter, particularly in situations where the material being posted may be of a sensitive variety. In those moments and moving forward, how one self-presents could be changed out of a sense of fear and aversion to potential negative responses (Kwon, Moon, & Stefanone, 2015; Van Kleek et al., 2015). This sense of ‘retreat’ from fully-authentic self-presentational behavior means that social media is vitally important to continue to explore and study. As users rely more and more on an online environment to help define their personalities and senses of identity, they are experiencing a wider range of different audiences, even those that may be competing – such as family and friends on the same social network as colleagues. These different audiences demand distinct types of presentation and being unaware of the potential danger of context collapse can mean that one post or one word said incorrectly on social media can have wide-ranging effects, as evidenced by any social media gaffe-to-unemployment story one cares to find online (Bell, 2018; Grégoire, Salle, & Tripp, 2015). Extending from that, then, being aware of the collapse may mean that users self-censor or even misrepresent themselves to account for the broader range of people, thus creating an identity that may not be wholly authentic.

With all the research on context collapse and its effects, though, there is room to explore exactly how the perception of audiences changes how people post and what they post. People present differently based on their awareness of the threat of context collapse or expanded audiences, but there is a need to understand how users perceive their audiences and what effect those audience sizes have on how they present. Further, users assume particular audiences are privy to their thoughts and posts, which also may have an impact on how they choose to present, although there is limited research on this connection. The next research question, then, looks at how people present themselves based on their perceived audiences.

*RQ4: How do users' perceptions of who will view their information impact self-representation?*

### **Perceived Affordances**

What users do online is dependent on what they believe they are able to do through the platforms they use. Each platform provides different options – affordances – for users to utilize (e.g. Facebook has filters) which in turn impact the user experience. The more that a platform can allow a user to do, the more varied the user experience can be. To that end, in looking at what affordances are available via different platforms, research may also extend to include potential technological uses beyond just what can or cannot be found within the platforms.

Affordances, according to Duffy & Scolere (2017) may also be imagined, or existing in a place where users believe that they can do certain things within and through the platforms, especially as far as self-presentation goes. Whether or not particular affordances exist, if users believe that they are able to do certain things, they are likely to behave in a particular way (Wellman et al., 2003). They will refashion who they are depending on what they believe they can do. This also is shown to be a principal component in presentation of both personal and

professional lives, as those categories, especially now, become blurred with activity. Affordances such as filters (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016; Vitak, 2012) could mean that users feel more open about expressing their true thoughts on certain platforms because they have the expectation of privacy or other advantages through that platform.

Different platforms allow for different identity representations to occur, but those affordances do not guarantee that the representations will be accepted as reality. Twitter, in comparison to Facebook, allows for complete anonymity if desired – such as fake names and profile pictures – to go along with muting and blocking particular users that one does not wish to interact with or encounter. However, sometimes those functions are utilized to punish others rather than to improve one’s own experiences (Jhaver, Ghoshal, Bruckman, & Gilbert, 2018). Snapchat, as an example, requires someone to be a friend or follower in order to obtain content, with the promise of impermanence as a feature being prominent in the platform, though that is losing ground due to the presence of screenshots. In each context, the platform allows users to do different things and interact with different people through different identities if one so chooses (Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Kofoed & Larsen, 2016). It is important to note, however, that being able to curate one’s identity through platforms does not ensure success in getting other users to accept that identity. For example, even though Facebook allows for a person to decide what to post in terms of pictures, posts, and shares, other users and connections do and will have expectations of what is acceptable social behavior, so posts that fall outside what particular social circles expect may still reflect negatively on one’s self-presentation (Zhou, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Because the platforms cannot guarantee the appearance of authenticity, users may begin curating their identity before even joining groups in order to better fit in once they officially join (e.g. lurk for a while to get the sense of the room, then register).

Users ultimately decide what the platforms can do for them and that determines how they interact with the platforms and other users. While Snapchat does boast of impermanence which ostensibly leads to more freedom in posting, there is the ability for others to be able to screenshot images, which negates that particular affordance's value. For Facebook, privacy filters can be skirted through 'friends of friends' – meaning that other users can view filtered profiles via the pages of mutual friends, post activity on others' pages – meaning that users can label, like, or engage with filtered pages through the activity of mutual friends, or other such methods (Johnson, Egelman, & Bellovin, 2012); Zimmer, 2010). Even with Twitter, the ability to be retweeted can lead to that context collapse and subsequent social concerns if left unchecked. In all of these instances, while the platforms can provide affordances to better allow users to create or define their identities, they will only be able to do what the users believe they can do (e.g. if impermanence is no longer feasible, users may lean toward self-censoring simply out of caution). The user experience dictates how they interact with others, which means that what they do and how they present themselves is predicated on what they believe to be the best course of action for them in those contexts.

In terms of research, there is value in spending time and energy looking into perceptions of affordances and how those perceptions influence self-presentation and communicative behavior. In considering what users believe the technology they utilize allows them to do, what they choose to do in relation to that and how they construct conversations with others is telling of what they value in their online interactions. If a user primarily avoids a 'voice chat' feature, for example, they may not prefer engaging in that level of conversation, while providing more information via a direct message system can mean that they are willing to share information, but prefer it to be on a more personal, one-on-one level. In turn, these preferences in interaction can

impact how users present themselves and how they connect with others. Simply put, what users believe they are able to do online could change how they portray themselves in that context.

The focus at present into what affects social presentation online is strongly based on audiences, particularly through context collapse, which means there is room to explore how users perceive affordances. As well, it allows for examining how what those components of platforms and social media allow users to do with their identities affects how those identities develop and even what they may be. Of further note, there is also a need to explore which affordances appear to provide the most room to play with self-presentation and what the differences are among the platforms. Keeping these affordances and lack of research in mind, the next research question extends from RQ4 but with a new perspective.

*RQ5: How do perceived affordances impact how users feel they can engage in deceptive practices?*

## **Summary**

Most of the literature in terms of self-presentation, particularly in relation to how contexts can change and affect behavior, considers audiences and who can or cannot see posts and what role those audiences can play in dictating what people choose to disclose about themselves. However, there is equal value in exploring how affordances of social media platforms can influence what people post and how they present as well. What is ultimately not known is how much of a role perceived affordances, as opposed to audiences, play in how and why people construct their identities and present themselves to the online world. The best answers for all these questions will arise from looking at how users value and make use of the ability to misrepresent themselves and why, as well as hearing the stories and experiences of those that still are finding their way in how they present themselves online. At present, there is



considerable study surrounding self-presentation, both online and offline, but that literature does not include much about misrepresentation to maintain social status, group norms and the role they play, about how users believe they see affordances and how that impacts the presentation, and what occurs when those factors work together. In those areas, there is room to explore who people choose to be and how they express that sense of self.

### CHAPTER 3. METHODS

This project was conducted qualitatively in order to explore personal experiences in a way that lent itself to a broader understanding of how users experienced self-presentation and engaging in deception online. Using their experiences, I gained greater insight into how they thought, felt, and experienced these practices while also collecting more detail for explanation. In speaking with users and hearing their stories, I was able to extend the research through coding for themes and common experiences. Having the flexibility to probe for more underlying ideas allowed me to find what drives behaviors and what makes users self-present in specific ways. As qualitative methods help us understand how people assign meaning to specific experiences, using these methods also allows us to understand why experiences differ. By qualitatively looking at how users experienced deception, we can gain a deeper understanding of why users differed in terms of how they were affected by the act of deception. Determining these meanings, then, is important for answering the research questions since the questions being asked refer to how the meanings they assigned affected how they developed those individual perceptions. In short, qualitative methods were the best match for this project because of its focus on the meaning assigned to experiences by individual users (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004).

For this project, I conducted interviews because they allowed me to understand experiences and what impacts those have had on users. All users of social media have, to an extent, curated their personas to reflect a personality that they believe best fits with their groups and social networks (Gehl, 2013). This selective self-presentation may extend to misrepresentation in cases where individuals disagree with the group but wish to maintain their status in the community. These users may feel comfortable hiding who they believe themselves to be, or they may have weighed the costs and benefits and decided that membership in the group

was more important than performing social roles as their ‘authentic selves,’ or they may simply have decided that speaking up or portraying themselves a specific way is not worth the inevitable backlash or conversations that may ensue from disclosing that information. In all those cases, their stories, experiences, and rationales provided a greater understanding of how they experienced being deceptive and the meaning they assigned to being so. In particular, their explanations helped to clarify their thought processes in engaging. For RQ1, participants’ explanations of their experience with misrepresentation helped show the variety of meanings that users assigned to deception and how those differing meanings affected them. For RQ2, data provided insight into ways users present themselves when they do not feel comfortable in a situation. For RQ3, users explained how they viewed the group norms and how perceived group expectations affected their choices regarding deception. For RQ4 and RQ5, the explanations given helped me understand how participants’ view of their audience(s) and the affordances of the Discord platform influenced their self-presentation. Beyond just understanding their motivations, those explanations by the participants helped illuminate connections between affordances and audiences and how these connections impact what users choose to do.

## **Participants**

For these interviews, I collected data from 27 participants who have, at one time or another, chosen to misrepresent themselves in an online social group, specifically that of the r/Fantasy Discord server with the option to expand beyond that context if needed. In terms of the inclusion criteria, the limits were determined by whether or not the context allowed for potential context collapse. For example, a dating site such as Match or Tinder is predicated on one-to-one conversation, with the only way context collapse can occur is if one party shares screenshots. In contrast, platforms such as Twitter or Facebook or, in this instance, Discord, provide the

potential for those audiences outside the intended group to see and engage with the user in question (e.g. a Facebook post about politics can bring in friends and acquaintances from all different users who are exposed to the post). To that end, the idea of ‘group’ within the criteria included the potential for others outside the specific target to engage with whatever has been said or done. Factors such as age (other than being above 18 years old), race, gender, and other demographic information did not serve as disqualifiers and that information was not collected if not volunteered by the participants. All interviews were conducted via the Discord direct message system (henceforth ‘DM’) and were scheduled at the convenience of the participants, with many opting to immediately interview and others choosing to set up a time and date more convenient for them.

In terms of the research setting, I approached via DM and got the consent of the administrators/owners of the Reddit Discord server for r/fantasy to place a call for participants. This server, particularly as it spans the world in terms of who uses the service, held and provided a wide range of potential participants. As a full disclosure, I am technically a member of that server. However, having not been an active and participating member in well over ten months at the time of conducting the study meant that I had developed a sufficient distance from the community to be able to be objective. This channel is made up of different demographics, especially those involving location, but the vast majority of the sample size encompassed users ranging from college age (e.g. 18-22 years old) to no older than 30 years old, which I believe still provides similar life experiences and user experiences within the context of the server and elsewhere. This server itself varies in terms of active users but, at any given time, the average user base online or within the server ranges from 75 to well over 100 users, though the number

of users who were active and participating at the time of recruitment was significantly lower – generally around 15 to 20.

Many participants, though not required to do so, volunteered their general location as well, which showed that users of the server come from places as varied as Mongolia, Australia, Ukraine, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The wide range of locales and time on the server means, to me, that the experiences that were shared are not specific to one type of user or way of using the service. Rather, those ranges show that the experiences that users have can be seen as part of the general user experience for those who make use of Discord. Further, no users were asked to disclose detail such as their ages, genders, sexualities, races, ethnicities, and the like, but several did volunteer such information, which revealed that these experiences the participants shared were not limited by any such demographic factors. In short, what they experienced was determined by the Discord rather than external qualities being manipulated.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this project took place over eight weeks between March and May 2019. Interviews were conducted via the direct message system on Discord at agreed-upon times between the participants and the researcher. This system functions as an instant messaging system in that participants in the message thread respond directly to one another in real time, though there is the possibility for delays if one participant steps away for a moment, which did happen twice. The motivation behind conducting these interviews online was two-fold. First, doing so corresponded to the same communication platform that was being studied. Second, doing so provided the opportunity for participants to reflect on their responses and offer clarification of their own accord if they so desired. These interviews lasted from 25 minutes to

102 minutes, with most interviews (21 of 27) lasting between 45 minutes and 75 minutes. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of their responses.

The questions for the interviews were intended to understand potential experiences that the participants may have had when it comes to how they have experienced self-presentation and deception and how what they believed surrounding each context informed how they felt and what they experienced. Each research question was written and targeted toward specific experiences and lines of thought (e.g. what they believed a certain platform allowed them to do) with room for expansion and explication of information if answers reveal the potential to do so, such as follow-up questions and requests to extend explanations and what the participants mean with their answers. Beyond their experiences with presentation and deception, both of which are foundational to this study, there were other opportunities and venues of discussion to follow as well. As well, I asked questions about who they believed they were interacting with at any given time and what concerns they may have had in terms of who can see what they say.

In deciding to move forward with the 27 participants, I felt as if I had achieved theoretical saturation and that any further interviews would not add additional thematic insights (Saunders et al., 2018). This saturation was determined by the point in data analysis at which no new themes emerged from the interviews. Due to the iterative nature of qualitative research, analysis was part of the collection process to help refine the interviews and what information was emerging from the data. This analysis took the form of isolating themes and looking for common experiences across all interviews and responses. As further interviews were conducted, the themes being addressed or brought up by the participants began to repeat, to the point that the last few interviews showed no unique or unexplored themes arising from the data, and the lack of unique-seeming responses by the last few participants sounding as if they were mainly reiterating

bits and pieces of the same variety of experiences and thought patterns that others had previously expressed would seem to also confirm that I had reached or was near to saturation point (Morse, 1995).

### **Data Analysis**

Within the data I collected, I was interested in analyzing how the participants experienced engaging in the practice of deception and what effect they believed it may have had on their relationship with the social groups in question. Further, I was interested in the relationship between how they viewed their audiences – e.g. who could read their posts – and what they believed the Discord application allowed them to do in terms of creating interaction strategies. I engaged in informal analysis as part of the data collection process in order to more effectively retrieve data from the interviews. As part of this informal coding process, I looked for basic themes in the interviews in order to adapt questions and focus further interviews on these emerging ideas. These initial steps helped to inform the main points to be identified in the next round of coding, as well as the type of coding that was best suited to the data.

In terms of coding, initial coding was done inductively and were informed by a base of themes found through the informal analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Thankfully, using Discord as the medium through which interviews were conducted allowed for the direct and immediate transcription of the interviews. The first round of coding involved taking every interview response and compiling them into a file from which they could be accessed, after which the responses to each question were read through. After organizing all 27 responses by question and response, the next step was to go through each question and list out the various main points stated in each response. These codes consisted of whatever information in the responses seemed to be valuable and served as a basis on which to build richer and more

meaningful codes. If there was overlap in how users responded, this was noted in the codebook and marked for further exploration. This initial coding led to a codebook that was detailed, but expansive.

In order to deepen the level of analysis, the next cycle of coding was causal coding which helped to target what participants believed led to what and how these processes affected one another (Saldaña, 2015), or the ‘mental maps’ participants used to understand their experiences. The purpose of going through this coding was to see and understand how different ideas – such as audience size and users’ willingness to be deceptive – connected in the minds of participants, especially in relation to the themes that were emerging from the analysis. An example here would be the participants believing that the smaller size of the audience led to them feeling more comfortable which in turn led to them being willing to share more and more accurate information about themselves in that group setting. This coding helped to give shape to the themes that were coming to the forefront, but a third cycle of coding was required.

The final cycle was focused coding, which allowed for combining codes into larger themes. This type of coding categorizes data based on thematic similarity and is used to build more useable categories across the body of data (Benaquisto & Given, 2008; Saldaña, 2015). Focused coding was best utilized here due to the large number of codes developed through the first two runs of coding and to help narrow the analysis down. For example, concerns about doxing, paranoia, and personal history and experiences (either their own or that of others) all were melded into a broader category of ‘Caution/Safety’ since all of those concerns and motivations could be subsumed under this category. For every question, this coding was implemented, which helped to narrow down 20 to 25 different codes per question into three, four, or – at maximum – five more general thematic codes per question. As a result, the themes



that emerged here were able to be related to one another in order to determine how they interacted, such as in the case of how users perceived their audiences and how that perception affected their willingness to be deceptive. One example, which was implemented, was looking to see if a user's belief that Discord provided privacy led to the user's viewing their audience as more limited and if that led to the user being more open with what they shared. In using this coding, broader concepts emerged, such as that of how users viewed affordances and audiences in relation to groups and how that affected what they chose to present about themselves. These three cycles of coding were used to develop the themes and sub-themes that answer the research questions, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

This chapter contains the results of the interviews conducted as described in Chapter 3 and the ensuing findings from those results. Before going into themes, a brief explanation of the different types of deception is appropriate and provides better context for what was found in the data. After detailing the types of deception, there will be the examination of four overarching themes that emerged after multiple rounds of coding: that the perception that deception is 'normal' online affects how users experience doing so, that users classify their information in different ways which affects how and if they engage in deception, that users engage in deception and other engagement out of a desire to fit in, and that how users engage in deception is affected by how they perceive audiences and affordances of their platform. Each of these themes will be addressed and explained with the addition of pertinent quotes from participants as well as numbers when appropriate.

### **Types of Deception**

Understanding the different types of deception that users used helps us understand why users chose to engage in deception – or not – in relation to other users. In general, there are six different categories into which the deceptions of the participants can be sorted. For each of these categories, there were different motivations that drove participants to make use of deception, but in all of them, even Minimal Deception, those who utilized active or passive deception were still doing so out of a sense of attempting to achieve something socially within the group.

#### *Information*

This type of deception specifically refers to participants being deceptive about personal information about themselves, though it does not include location. Nearly half of participants (n=12) explained, in detailing the specific instances of engaging in deception, that what they

were deceptive about was information that they considered to be more private. Rather than omitting information or simply not discussing it, these participants instead chose to actively deceive the other users when sharing that information. In general, this was done to provide a certain type of presentation to the group as a whole. As an example, participant 'Joe' said that "I typically downplay my financial means and how much time/energy/enthusiasm I invest in certain activities," due to other group members not being able to share the same experiences with them. As another example, Participants 'Derek' and 'Carrie' both mentioned that they had lied about their age, in different contexts, in order to gain social benefits that came from being perceived as older than they actually were. Even though that information is likely something that they considered to be more private or sensitive, they actively chose to provide an untrue representation of those components of their life.

#### *Location*

Another type of deception that some participants (n=5) engaged in was that of misrepresenting to others where their locations were at that given time. An example, from participant 'Taylor,' was clear in explaining the motivation out of a desire to be safe, saying, 'someone was very aggressive about where I lived, and I lied and told them I didn't live in [city] because they casually said they did.' This specific instance created, for the user, the need to be deceptive in order to keep safe from a potentially-dangerous situation. Due to the nature of the possible threat, simply omitting information was not possible. Instead, the user had to utilize active deception so as to stay safe, even if there was no direct threat. Participant 'Rick' was even more succinct and without detail, saying 'Several times I've lied about the city I live in.' For these users, there was more value in engaging in deception than there was in simply staying silent, especially regarding their personal information. For them, deception was preferable in that

it provided an alternative perception of parts of their lives to people they may not necessarily want to be privy to the truth.

### *Books*

About a quarter of participants (n=6) admitted to misrepresenting something about themselves in relation to books. For these participants, they deceived out of a sense of connecting themselves to the group or otherwise trying to provide a type of perception about themselves. Participant 'Pam' even admitted as much, saying that one of their common deceptions is their use of the classic example: 'I'll read this book for sure' or its variation 'This sounds great, I'm reading it next/as soon as possible,' even if those actions will not occur for any number of reasons. For them, providing the perception of being willing to join in the conversation allowed them to feel like they were a part of the group. Another example, from participant 'Erica,' referred to how they would sometimes become deceptive through modifying reading timelines and "implying books I'd read a while back were more recent in conversations." In this case, the participant would seek to join in by following the trends within the group, specifically in the context of appearing to read books at the same time as others. For both of these users, these deceptions were actively done to achieve a goal, although none of the participants considered them to be particularly egregious.

### *Opinions*

Some participants (n=6) were deceptive about their opinions and engaged in active misrepresentation about what they thought regarding certain topics. These topics ranged from how they felt about specific books to even agreeing with opinions with which they disagreed. Participant 'Kevin' had one example in reference to an opinion they held and shared, saying of their deception:

We were talking about books we didn't like. I mentioned *The Name of the Wind*, which isn't really true. I did like that book; I just didn't like the sequel. No real reason for it. The book was a 3 star for me, so at the time, I decided to show my more "disliked book" side of it.

Despite saying something knowingly inaccurate, the participant did not think much of it, deciding to reference a stronger dislike than they actually had, though they admit no clear reason for doing so. Another participant ('Rick') was upfront in saying that they were deceptive about one of their opinions by saying they "liked something I really didn't care for," though they did not go into further detail about what that would have been. However, some deceptions about opinions were not so benign. Another participant, 'Tyler,' said "I faked being ignorant on [certain] topics to make it funny to others," despite not believing that way and feeling bad about doing so after, even going so far as to admit a sense of discomfort about appearing to be uninformed to engage with others. These deceptions, whether small or larger, were done out of a sense of wanting to connect and being accepted by others, even though the opinions were not what they truly believed.

#### *Minimal Deception*

Similarly, another type of deception that some users (n=7) engaged in is simply minimal in nature. These deceptions qualify as 'minimal' because the users categorized them as such, using terms that specifically are designed to minimize the level of negative connotations associated with being deceptive and typically motivated by a sense of desiring connection with others. For example, participant 'Cory' admitted that "I've told minor white lies". Another participant, 'Mary,' acknowledged that they "have sometimes seeded false information in otherwise true anecdotes" when engaging with others, out of a sense of wanting to protect

themselves and others being referenced. However, participants were also quick to point out their reticence to lie at all, for various reasons. Participant ‘Mitch’ was not willing to deceive because he saw it as futile, saying “to be honest i don't see the point or feel the need to lie on the internet [sic],” while ‘Cory’ took a different approach to the same idea by actually preferring to not be deceptive, saying, “I value being open an [sic] honest, quite highly.” Interestingly, it was only this type of deception, aside from those who did not see their actions as truly deceptive, that warranted the clarifications or attempted mitigations from the participants.

### *Omission*

Deception may also include omission of precise details. This is appropriate as the users are self-presenting and providing information (or not) in a specific way that may not offer an accurate or truthful presentation of themselves within the confines of the group. This can take the form of, as an example, users not sharing information that would give others a better context for who they are (e.g. family dynamics) in favor of presenting a modified version that may be more acceptable or desirable within the group setting. Participants also withheld information about themselves in order to maintain a particular self-presentation, such as participant ‘Carl,’ who intentionally withheld their nationality in order to avoid assumptions that others would make. In their words, “I just don't want to be labelled [sic],” with the implication being that they would be treated in a particular – and possibly unfair – way based on their specific nationality. Finally, half of the participants (n=14) discussed how the importance of controlling their information and what they chose to share – or more importantly, not share – impacted how they utilized platforms and how they were able to feel a sense of comfort in presenting themselves in a particular way.

## **Theme 1: Perception of Deception Affects Experience Doing So**

The first theme to emerge considers how users perceive the idea of deception affects how they experience engaging in that behavior. More specifically, the perception that deceiving others online is something ‘normal’ or just something that is always done in that online context affects how users approach deception. In believing that deception is simply just a normal part of online behavior, users may treat deceiving as something normal and, as a result, may not experience any sort of reaction at all to doing so. However, if users do not perceive deception as something normal or just part of being online, they are more likely to feel negative emotions during and after engaging in deceptive practices.

In the questions, participants were asked to explain a time where they had employed misrepresentation online and on Discord, with the written understanding that these misrepresentations did not necessarily need to be massive or life-changing (e.g. completely fabricating an identity, history, and the like), but could instead be small but still affect conversation (e.g. saying they liked a specific book when they did not). After participants detailed what they had said or done, they were asked to explain how they felt both during and after doing so and what effect they believe it had on how the group saw them and how they felt about themselves. These responses fell into one of three categories, depending on context. Users either experienced a negative effect - which could consist of experiencing unpleasant or uncomfortable emotions or internal beliefs, experienced no real effect - meaning that participants reported not feeling any type of emotional reaction to their behavior, with multiple participants couching their deception as ‘normal’ and thus warranting no reaction, or reached the point of believing that they had not deceived at all, typically because they saw their statement as not wholly untrue, or phrased in a way that was technically accurate from a specific point of view.

### *Negative Perception*

'Negative Perception' refers to instances in which participants experience negative emotions because they viewed deception as wrong regardless of context. Roughly half (n =14) of participants experienced distress or negative emotions after engaging in misrepresentation and deceptive practices. Responses such as "At the time, the discomfort I felt by saying [deceptive] things seemed like it would be less than the discomfort I'd feel if I spoke truthfully" and "It felt like I crossed a line" show that the act of engaging in deception, for these users, was something that they considered to be transgressive and expected, beforehand, that doing so would create a sense of discomfort. These feelings commonly reflected many of the same internal reactions to their misrepresentations. The most frequent emotions (n=7) were feeling a sense of guilt ("Perhaps a bit of guilt") or feeling uncomfortable or discomfort with their actions ("Uncomfortable, unhappy to be deceitful"). Other users (n=2) specifically mentioned regret for their actions ("Afterwards I felt like I needed to delete it, just a lot of regret.").

In all these cases, the users were affected emotionally after the fact. Some users (n=3) even reported feeling as if they needed to leave the environment. One such user was 'Carl,' who was deceptive about their age and their adherence to group norms (in this case, being a vegan). After being deceptive about these components of their identity, they felt a sense of unease and a need for distance from the group, saying, "I felt like I couldn't really show my face for a while so I didn't talk in there again for ages." This sense of disconnection was not isolated to one individual, however, as some participants (n=5) also experienced a sense of withdrawal with the group and others after engaging in deception, which effectively counteracted the entire motivation behind being deceptive. Others (n=3) felt compelled to not engage in that kind of behavior again. Participant 'Derek' showed intense discomfort and expressed substantial regret



with their actions – specifically, lying about their status as a moderator in another group in order to appear and be accepted as important by other members – and the consequences thereof, saying “I can never let the truth slip, even now. I could never ask for help with those matters before, because that would blow my cover. Lies are stupid, I won't lie like that again.” This reaction is intense and shows that the lingering effect of being deceptive affects how individuals will interact with others online moving forward.

For these users, engaging in misrepresentation of themselves or their views created a sense of internal strife, with ‘Adam’ going so far as to say that they “felt horrible when I had to deal with the situation. The whole thing lasted about 3 days and I got about 4 hours of sleep each night, at a max,” when dealing with a situation as a moderator where they had to remove a member’s ability to chat in order to figure out appropriate discipline and, as a result, had to be deceptive about the nature of said removal. Even though it was for the greater good, the emotional toll taken by being deceptive on top of having to manage an uncomfortable situation is clear. Whether or not engaging in the deception was successful did not seem to factor in to how participants felt, with ‘Carl’ saying that “[u]ltimately none of it really paid off,” as far as rewards or social benefits were concerned.

### *No Reaction*

This sub-theme represents a neutral response to the act of deception. If users did not feel negatively about engaging in deception, they tended to not feel much about what they were saying or doing, with multiple participants (n=11) stating experiences to that effect. “To be honest, I feel pretty neutral about it,” said ‘Mitch,’ in reference to their being deceptive about their knowledge or how they felt about a discussion within the group. This belief was somewhat common, with a few (n=4) participants saying similar phrases. This sort of emotional detachment

may also be impacted by users viewing the context in which they were engaging in a different light than those who viewed the deception negatively. Rather than seeing the deception as something that was a negative act in a broader sense, they contextualized the deception as simply an inevitable part of being on the Internet, thus not requiring any emotional investment since it is a 'normal' behavior in that context. To that end, they would not be bothered because those sorts of actions are just what someone in that context does as part of the experience.

One participant ('Carrie') explained being dismissive about whether or not they felt negatively about being deceptive regarding their name and how often they changed how they presented their reading history to others, saying, "honestly, it's such a meaningless thing that I don't really care; lying on the internet, oh no, the internet police are definitely after me now." This sarcasm and derisiveness were reflected by other users (n =5) as well, who were under the impression – correctly or not – that since people lie on the Internet, it was of little value to worry about it. Sentiments from these participants were that the deceptions did not matter or were unimportant because 'it's the Internet' or 'it's online' ('Mario'), with the implication that the Internet did not constitute a form of 'real life' and thus did not warrant consideration. 'Carrie' also utilized this perception of Internet interaction in summing up their impressions of the study and other potential participants' answers, saying, "I don't think every response will be truthful regardless inherentlyly [sic] because of how the internet and it's [sic] denizens behave." In short, participants within this category expected others to lie because they believed that is something that simply happens in online communities.

For these users, whether they did not care or because they assumed the Internet and how others interact on it work in a particular way, the experience of misrepresentation was not something that influenced their lives or on how they viewed other users. It was simply something

that they did and let go. As stated by ‘Alfred,’ “I felt fine both during and after,” and that they “rarely aim to please people. It is what it is,” regarding their being deceptive about whether or not they enjoyed a particular popular book within the group. This statement seems to suggest that being truthful or forthright in engaging with others is typically done in an effort to pacify or make others happy, rather than by virtue of some sense of it being ‘the right thing to do,’ though another user (‘Doug’) countered that idea by saying, “I dont [sic] really see much point in falsehoods as they’ll probably come back around to bite you in the ass,” signifying a desire to remain truthful (albeit out of a sense of self-preservation).

#### *Doesn’t Count As Lying*

This sub-theme refers to users simply not believing that what they had done would qualify as deception. Similar to deceptive behavior being normalized and therefore not worth feeling negative about in an online context, two participants did not feel that they had even necessarily engaged in deception because what they had said was true from specific points of view. For these users, misrepresentation was purely contextual, and they felt as if what they had said or done did not qualify as being untrue. As a result, they did not feel any negative emotions or experience any kind of discomfort from what they said or did, which leads to considering whether deception has any kind of internal effect only if the person engaging in said actions recognizes them as being deceptive.

These participants justified these actions in different ways. One user said that they “never felt I was saying anything blatantly untrue. Even the exaggerations were true depending on perspective,” referring to their deception about the size of their hometown and the type of personality both they and the town maintained (‘country,’ which was not explained). This statement shows a sort of ‘splitting hairs,’ so to speak, when it comes to deciding whether or not

what they did could be seen as deceptive. With the introduction of ‘perspective,’ the user was able to spin what was said as being truthful. The other user took a slightly different path in saying that what they experienced, in being deceptive about disliking a specific book series, “wasnt [sic] guilt at all - the bottom line was true.” This statement is a bit more clear-cut in that what was important was that the main point is accurate, while all the rest does not have to be true. Regardless of the variety of truthfulness or accuracy in the actions, their framing of their behavior as not ‘really’ deceptive gives further credence to the idea that whether or not someone feels negatively about engaging in deception is affected by the context in which they view their actions.

## **Theme 2: Different Information Determines Deception Usage**

The next theme to arise from the data was that of how users classify their personal information which, along with a desire to stay safe, determines what they decide to share or not and if and how they will be deceptive – either passively or actively – in relation to what is shared with others. While this practice varies by situation, typically participants were more willing to share what they described as “basic information” about themselves while keeping private more sensitive information that they felt could be utilized by other users to find them or damage their reputation in some way. Participants were asked a series of questions detailing what types of information they were comfortable with sharing with anyone in a larger group as well as what information they were more reticent to share and the contexts in which that information would be safe to share in their minds. Responses from participants covered how they decided what information about themselves was fine to share with others and when, as well as what they chose not to share, why they chose not to share, and in what contexts they would engage in deception, including omission, regarding that information.

### *Basic Information*

Before addressing more specialized and private information, it is important to understand what information users typically feel comfortable sharing about themselves in any context, as that provides a baseline understanding of what a given user is likely to share – and by extension, be deceptive about – at any given time. This information is fairly standard across the majority of participants (n=16) and does not have much variation in what is easily shared. This information typically falls along the lines of age, sex, gender, race, general location, general job, and other general information. Participant ‘Derek’ provided a good example of that information, saying that when sharing, things such as “age, sex, home country, color of skin etc. etc. [are] fine,” while participant ‘Rick’ went a bit further, saying that were ‘white, and I live in [state], currently attending a community college.” For participants, this basic type of personal information is shareable because it does not seem to provide other users anything that is useable against them and is not worth worrying about. Participant ‘Eli’ even said that they “don’t have trouble posting my personal information” while participant ‘Adrian’ said, “im [sic] happy to share anything when asked by another individual,” although they did not go into explicit detail as to what ‘anything’ would entail. For these users, though, sharing of basic information is something that is generally acceptable and not worth the time to be deceptive about.

That being said, there may still be situations in which users engage in deception about even the most basic of information. For example, participant ‘Derek’ admitted that they would be deceptive about their age before they turned eighteen years old, which was done so that “people wouldn’t see me as a child.” Another participant (‘Jennifer’) mentioned that they are “telling an “untruth” whether I say I’m Austrian or Ukrainian.” This statement is in reference to their ethnicity, which is information that typically does not appear to warrant deception, although for

this participant, they did not feel as if they were truly one nationality or another, meaning that either way they chose to identify, they felt as if they were being deceptive in some way. In both instances, despite the information at hand typically being that which users admit to sharing readily and without much hesitation, these participants engaged in deception about fundamental information about themselves. For these users, there still was something motivating them to be deceptive, even about the most basic of information.

### *Sensitive Information*

This kind of information tends to be that which could be used to identify or physically locate individual users. Where participants have difficulty sharing information about themselves is with more specific information that could directly link the users to any type of offline identity or representation that users want to stay hidden. Participant ‘Pam’ explained, saying that they do not share “the name of the town I lived in, or posting any pics that could identify it,” with safety being mentioned as part of the reasoning behind not doing so. Pictures being information that is not easily – if at all – shared was not uncommon with several (n=7) participants explicitly listing that they did not provide those for other users. Another type of information kept entirely private was exact locations or addresses, with nearly half (n=12) of participants refusing to give that information to other users. Participant ‘Adam’ extended what was not shareable information by saying that they do not share “Anything that might put me at risk - names of pets, specific age, specific city of residence, full name, passwords etc..” Finally, in general, politics and opinions about politics tend to not be shared in a larger context with multiple (n=10) participants stating that they chose not to share or engage with the topic, with one participant (‘Alfred’) saying, “I don’t engage in Facebook or twitter politics at all.” Participant ‘Joe’ explained further their reticence to engage in politics, saying that they were “not that informed on current events and

don't feel qualified to contribute." For them, they did not want to appear ignorant in front of a group, especially one where they viewed others as more articulate and reasoned. Instead, not saying much at all allowed them to maintain a certain presentation.

Much of the reasoning for not sharing specific kinds of information about themselves also seems to coincide with their concern about experiencing negative consequences after exposing said information. More specifically, users expressed concern about there being offline costs should anyone outside their expected audience obtain that information, with several (n=10) participants showing specific concern about being doxed and harassed. These participants explained their feelings using such terms as 'partially paranoia,' "fear of doxxing [sic]," and expressing a worry that they may face in "potentially coming across people i [sic] know in real life or at work." For these users, simply being aware of the potential for their information to be used as a weapon against them in their offline lives was enough to create a sense of concern and worry around what they decided to share and where. As a result, users pick and choose what they share – and not share – about themselves. Participant 'Arnold' said as much, saying that they "usually only generalize my experiences leaving out specific identifiers that could lead to doxing." In leaving out specific details about their life, this user was being directly deceptive in how they were presented in order to only offer potential 'doxers' so much information from which to work.

Beyond simple fear, however, about a quarter of participants (n=8) also explained their concerns about being harassed or their information being used against them by referencing either their own personal history with such behavior or their interactions with others who had experienced said events. Participant 'Carrie' explained their experience, saying, "that a lot of the whole "don't share you [sic] information online" campaign that happened in the 2010s was a

common thing to hear,” while also explaining that they had “gotten relatively used to disassociation IRL and internet personas.” This means that they were aware that users present themselves in certain ways, including developing Internet personas, even to keep themselves safe, which they did. Participant ‘Arnold’ said something similar, explaining that “you have a history that is strictly an online one” in terms of what is valuable in terms of trying to keep a particular kind of presentation when interacting with others. Rather than sharing specific information about their offline identities, users had an online presence to build and work with, regardless of context. Participant ‘Adam’ took a slightly different track, detailing how they had experienced negative consequences by saying “I’ve seen how posting that stuff can screw people over, first hand,” though they did not share details. Participant ‘Cory’ related a similar experience, explaining their desire to not share specific information due to “the horror stories I’ve heard from some people, detailing how somebody found them, tracked them down in real life and stalked them.” Rather than vague fears about potential consequences, these users had either direct or second-hand experience with those actions or had been taught to avoid them as best they could, leading to a reticence in sharing sensitive information or, alternatively, going so far as to build a specific kind of online presentation for their social groups.

However, several (n=11) participants also reported engaging in outright deception about information that would be considered ‘sensitive’ as well, with different contexts. Participant ‘Tyler’ described one situation, saying, “It’s like I faked being ignorant on those topics [opinions of controversial issues] to make it funny to others based on the assumption that they were not accepting of those things.” For this user, they actively deceived others within the group in relation to how they truly felt politically because they wanted to connect with other users, even over sensitive topics. Once again, participant ‘Taylor’ admitted to being deceptive about their



information, saying, ‘someone was very aggressive about where I lived, and I lied and told them I didn’t live in [city] because they casually said they did.’ A third user, ‘Rick,’ outright acknowledged that they deceived frequently, saying, “Several times I’ve lied about the city I live in,” with the goal in mind of confusing other users or potentially throwing off stalkers or those who wished them violence. For all these users, the utility of being deceptive extended beyond that of simply not divulging information. For them, it was important to actively introduce false information into the group in order to either fit in or stay safe, depending on the individual motivation.

### **Theme 3: Deceiving Others to Fit In**

The next theme to emerge from the data is that of how the desire to fit in with a group, fueled by both internal desires and external expectations, drives users’ choices regarding deception of others in the group. Being part of the group does affect how users engage and/or deceive others, especially in relation to users believe the group is about and what they feel would ‘play best,’ so to speak, with the group’s dynamic. Participants were asked a series of questions detailing why they choose to engage online in certain contexts, how they choose to do so, and how the community in which they find themselves participating similarly affects that engagement. Responses from participants covered how they feel about being a part of a group, how they see the group affecting what they do, and how they manage presenting themselves – even through deception – to that group.

#### *Acceptance*

This sub-theme refers to users adopting different behaviors in order to be accepted as part of the group and, in some cases, actively engaging in various types of deception about themselves to become and remain a part of the community at large. Addressing first the idea of

‘fitting in,’ nearly half (n= 11) of users showed that they do want to be accepted by the group, regardless of external context, while nearly all participants (n=24) also expressed a desire to be seen positively within the group and to maintain a positive appearance in the eyes of other group members. One user (‘Arnold’) explained their flexibility in engaging with others by outright saying that, “You want to be part of a group, so you change [habits].” In this participant’s context, they meant that they would devote more time to the activity, but the salient point is that they – and likely many others – are willing to change what they do in order to become or remain a part of a desirable social group. This desire to fit in also leads to users filtering what they say or do. Another user (‘Doug’) admitted that the filtering they chose to do is likely fueled by “perhaps some underlying need to feel accepted.” This statement illustrates how important feeling as if one is a part of a group is for so many users which, in turn, can motivate them to find a way to stay connected and accepted by the social groups. Maintaining a sense of connection is also important to users, with over a quarter (n=9) of participants mentioning that they joined the group and continued to interact with others out of a desire to build and maintain social connections and potential friendships.

This desire to fit in can also, in some cases, be so powerful as to override even personal belief systems and motivate users to be deceptive or misrepresent who they are in order to connect. This deception can take the form of users verbally (or via whatever form communication takes for a platform) agreeing with jokes or statements made that they disagree with as long as they are part of the norms of the group. One participant (‘Eli’) avoided a political argument by agreeing against their beliefs, saying:

The topic I think was gun control. Again it's been a while and exact details are fuzzy. I tend to be fairly progun, and the people I was with were anti especially among the

Europeans. At the time I didn't want any conflict with the group so I agreed with them despite not really agreeing IRL.

This statement shows that the participant was so motivated by remaining part of the group and avoiding negative interactions that they were willing to agree with opinions that they admit they disagreed with in an offline context. For them, the group was more important to their wellbeing than even opinions that they believed were important.

The desire to fit in can even extend users shifting their style of being deceptive from passive engagement (e.g. agreement) to a more active form of acting counter to one's beliefs. Users may, in an effort to fit in, go so far as to participate and join in on the conversations that run counter to their beliefs. Another participant ('Tyler') shared that they said and took part in jokes counter to their comfort for similar reasons.

I felt like it wasn't as safe to speak my mind so I would stay with jokes. Sometimes that resulted in off color jokes that I wouldn't agree with offline and I regret making them.

But it would have a good response in chat.

This statement shows that, while the motivation to fit in was paramount in the actions and things they would do, it was not sufficient to completely counteract negative feelings that came about because of doing so. In admitting that they regretted making the jokes, the user is saying that fitting in with the group – receiving a 'good response in chat' – came at a price: that of their own internal wellbeing. That being said, users, in service of contributing to and being accepted by a social group, may actually go so far as to do what they can to discredit what they actually support. Participant 'Carrie' even admitted outright that they would run counter to their own beliefs to better fit in with a group.

I'll either keep quiet or join in half-halfheartedly bashing X, even if I believe in X, depends on what X is. there's [sic] certain things I'll stand up for regardless, but for a lot of smaller beliefs, it's doesn't matter enough to me to bother. group > individual.

When asked to expand, 'Carrie' said that they felt as if there were certain appearances that needed to be maintained and that any sort of self-presentation must be consistent. For them, being in the group and continuing to behave in a way that appeared 'normal' within the group confines was more important than certain beliefs. This statement shows – and flat out says – that this user (and likely others) values being a part of the group more than maintaining a sense of individuality of expression or beliefs.

For all these users, regardless of whether they simply agree or actively take part in supporting beliefs counter to their own, they are bound by a sense of wanting to fit in and belong actively overriding other internal motivators. For them, even negative internal effects, created by taking part in group norms that contradict what they may actually feel and believe, do not outweigh the positive aspects of being a part of the group, which are more important than staying true to their own externally-developed beliefs or values.

#### *Avoiding Negativity*

This sub-theme refers to users observing group expectations and modify their behavior in order to avoid damage to group ties. As part of building a presentation of themselves to utilize within the group, users also develop – typically through observation of others – an understanding of both what is expected within the group and what happens to those who violate those expectations. These expectations, whether they are explicitly expressed or not, then can directly impact the choices that users make with one another. This sense of avoiding negative presentation differs from a desire to fit in by virtue of the fact that users are not trying to put

forward a positive presentation or that they are agreeable to the group identity. Rather, they are attempting to avoid being perceived in a negative context by other group members. This decision to avoid being perceived negatively is important to users, despite the fact that most (n= 22) participants did not mention experiencing negative reactions from the other users after being deceptive. This determination to avoid the negativity could come from any number of motivations, from feeling lucky that they did not suffer penalties to wanting to not experience the negative reactions, but it is unclear from the data exactly how the users reconciled those two experiences. Regardless, some users did feel the desire to avoid negativity and expressed those concerns in their responses.

For example, one participant ('Derek') was concerned about their deception because of expected consequences from the reactions of the other users, since they were not only violating specific server sub-group norms by not being a vegan, but because they were being deceptive about it. "If they discover that I preached my diet one year before ever using it myself, they would definitely trust me less and would start looking for more lies." This statement explains how the participant viewed the group in which they were engaged and, after deceiving them, what they expected would happen were that to become exposed. As a result, they were made to feel wary about how they connected with others, simply because they knew the group and were reasonably able to project their reactions were what they had said to be brought to light. This, in effect, determined how and in what ways they were willing to deceive in the future, since they expected that any further deception or their deception being exposed would create a negative perception of who they were and what their role was within the group.

Another user ('Rick') detailed how, rather than expecting what would happen were 'misdeeds' to be exposed, they experienced how violating of group norms was met with

resistance within the community, saying, “I criticized something that I felt was overhyped or had themes in it I found troubling, and got kicked (tempbanned) for it. So I choose to go along, occasionally [sic] letting how I feel come out.” This statement shows that, in the face of engaging without deception, users in this setting would face penalties if they violated group norms and expectations. As a result, this user felt that it was necessary to present themselves in a specific way – even if it was not internally-consistent – so as to avoid incurring further penalties based on how users expected the group would react. Their engaging in deception was, to them, necessary to avoid being perceived negatively within the group, even if the norms did not completely coincide with what they personally felt.

This censorship may be further exacerbated by the engagement style of the other users. As an example, participant ‘Doug’ described the server members as “a bit intense about their likes/dislikes and will battle you over them essentially.” With that intensity of personalities in the server, especially given their propensity to engage in conflict over these issues, the user may have believed that they needed to be careful in order to avoid such an argument. As a result, the user felt inclined to make use of a ‘filter’ to only say certain opinions that would not be viewed negatively, since “if someone is disgruntled there's a fear of being rejected from the ‘herd’.” This statement illustrates how the norms of the group can not only lead to difficulties in engagement with other users, but also introduce the need to engage in ways that would not lead to potentially-negative responses from others. If one is expecting that there will be a battle at hand if something counter to the group norms is said or done, that inevitably can result in users simply disengaging or choosing to utilize deceptive practices in order to engage more effectively. About a third (n=8) of participants mentioned that they simply try to avoid conversations where they feel as if there would be negative consequences garnered by sharing their actual opinions or beliefs. One

participant ('Jake') explicitly stated this, saying, "Politics as a topic usually introduces a degree of negativity (regardless of participants) into an aspect of my life that I don't want to receive or introduce negativity into, so I mostly avoid that nowadays". For this user, political discussions created discomfort in their social life so, as a result, they avoided engaging in those discussions, even if they otherwise would have liked to do so.

Another participant ('Joe') took a similar approach in their interactions and avoided sharing their opinions (on books) that may run counter to that of the community, saying, "I rarely choose to post opinions I have about books that I know are opposite of what most others feel". Instead of joining in on discussions and perhaps sparking new through-lines of communication, this user simply disengages from the conversation in order to maintain neutrality or their position within the group. While this sort of self-censorship may not be actively deceiving other users, it does serve as a type of deception and also appears to contribute to a sense of distance from the community, which 'Joe' also mentioned, saying that their deception was "likely counterproductive and just prevented others from getting to know me better and forming a closer relationship with me". This statement appears to be somewhat telling, as it illustrates that users still may be motivated to censor themselves and not engage in conversations that could be at all negative, even if doing so may lead to negative effects on their connection to the group regardless. For these users, they felt compelled to engage in deceptive practices so as to continue to operate within the group and avoid being perceived negatively or get into negative interactions with others. As a result of having experienced these expectations, they felt unable to present themselves within the group without modification to their presentations.

This desire to avoid negative effects can also lead to the use of deceptive practices and misrepresentation to appear to align with the expectations. This motivation can be critical in how

users decide to engage with one another. One participant ('Erica') mentioned these expectations in describing why they chose to engage in deception by exaggerating what and how often they were reading books.

I wanted to be able to participate in conversation given that it was a topic I was interested in. It felt like you had to be reading a lot right then to do so. It wasn't the audience, not in a personal sense - more in a 'this is the community and this is how the community functions' sense.

While this particular case was not a sense of creating penalties if a specific type of engagement was enacted, this statement does give further credence to the idea that there are some broad-scale expectations in place that color the group and, from that, how users choose to take part within the group is determined by their desire to participate and avoid negative reactions. This desire to maintain relationships also, then, affects the content being shared, which may include utilizing deception or misrepresentation to better align with group norms and expectations – which can, in turn, affect user self-perception, often negatively.

#### *Concern For Others*

This sub-theme refers to users focusing on the impact of their actions on the experience of other users. Some participants (n=8) expressed concern about how their actions and words would affect the other users in the group leading them to engage with other users in certain ways, including deception. This can sometimes take the form of acting as a moderating presence. Participant 'Cory' explained their deception by stating that "when people start loudly arguing, I try and avoid those situations by playing peacekeeper a bit, even if it includes a small lie or two." These lies take the shape of agreeing with a user to calm a situation down or saying that they



liked something to avoid the argument escalating. Out of a concern for other users, they were willing to be deceptive to maintain a sense of peace.

Other participants were afraid to disrupt the experience of other users with different discussions. They would explain this by saying such things as that they sometimes would either say little or nothing out of a sense of “I guess just not wanting to get into a big argument and spoil everyone's fun.” This focus on the community can even be turned inward with one participant saying that they chose not to speak up about some things that bothered them because “I don't feel anyone would want to deal with it or that posting things of a negative nature would burden the chat.” To that end, those users invested in their role in the lives of others were more careful about what they said and when and based their actions on the expected effect on other users.

#### **Theme 4: Affordances and Audiences Determine Deceptive Practices**

The last theme to emerge from coding was that of how users are more likely to be truthful and not engage in deceptive practices, including omission of information, as they become and feel more comfortable within a particular group context. As a perceived audience decreases in expected size, that perception leads to a greater willingness to share personal information, as does a user feeling as if the group is more private and that they are in control of their own information. Participants were asked questions about who they believed could see what they said and how that impacted what they did as well as what they believed the particular platform (Discord) allowed them to do and how that affected their sharing and engagement as well. Responses from participants tended to show some common factors in what helps users become comfortable in their environment and, as a result, how much they were willing to divulge in these online spaces, which includes whether or not they are motivated to provide information about

themselves (opinions, etc.) that they normally would choose to be deceptive about and omit entirely from conversation.

### *Size of Audience*

With this sub-theme, the larger the user perceives their audience to be, the less likely a user is to share specific personal information, such as location or pictures of themselves. Instead, they will omit this information or avoid conversation about certain topics. In looking at how users perceived audiences and how those are provided by the platform's affordances and how those perceptions influenced their self-presentation, the idea that 'size matters' is prevalent. For most participants (n=20), the size and type of perceived audience that can interact with a user affects what said user chooses to share or not share. Different sizes and expected types or styles of audiences impact and help users make those determinations regarding what they say about themselves and how they put that information forward. As an example, participant 'Tyler' said, "If I see that a large number of people are in a server, say there's 200 people and only about 10-15 are active in the chat, I'm going to be more reserved about what I post (pictures, opinions, links)." In that context, this user is more motivated to be deceptive, even if passively, due to the increased size of the potential audience. As another example, participant 'Cory' explained how, in a setting where they did not know the size of the audience, they would engage in deception by omission, saying, "I would try to avoid saying anything to get anybody riled up in the first place" rather than engaging in debates.

In comparison, the smaller a group is, the more comfortable that users become with the audiences within the group, and – as a result – they become more willing to share personal information about themselves. This is explained by participant 'Jake,' who says that it is easier to share because of, "the specific people in [the server], as well as the size. Whoever logs in here

can talk to the same few dozen folks every day.” Another user (‘Carl’) went further in expressing their sense of wellbeing in that “the smaller numbers of people in general makes it feel like you're exposing yourself a lot less” in terms of opening oneself up to potential dangers, since “there's maybe a few hundred people in a chatroom and it's a lot harder to dig up stuff someone has said in the past.” As a result, the audience feels smaller and less dangerous than audiences in other contexts that may create discomfort, such as in the case of ‘Tyler,’ who says, “I’m wary about what the lurking people might see and what they might remember.” Resulting from that wariness, ‘Tyler’ was also open about omitting or not engaging with certain topics, saying that they “choose not to post anything inflammatory or controversial”.

Aside from the *audience* size affecting what users feel comfortable sharing, in terms of perceived affordances, users find that their willingness to share information and engage is affected by whether or not the size of the *platform* feels smaller or more intimate, since the perceived audience will be smaller and thus more trustworthy. This sentiment was shared by almost half the users (n=12) who appreciated the closeness provided to them through that aspect of the platform. One user (‘Tyler’) said that what they share is impacted by “the size of the server” which changes “how many people could potentially be reading what I’m saying.” This statement shows how perceived affordances are both important and inextricably tied into the effect of perceived audiences as well, since the size of the server affects how many people could potentially view whatever they may be posting. Another user (‘Doug’) mentioned that “the flexibility of how many people are allowed in the server determines how much I'd share, referring [sic] back to how comfortable I feel in a situation.” This statement directly explicates that they feel more comfortable with the smaller server and, thus, a smaller audience, which results in them determining what is and is not going to be shared or what they will talk about within that

context. 'Doug' goes on to mention how in different contexts, they "tend ot [sic] conduct myself with more caution for lack of a better word," which to them means avoiding discussing certain things, such as "deep emotional stuff," regardless of the connections they could potentially form with other users. In their words, "I have no interest in talking about it," meaning that information will stay hidden from the group.

Part of the comfort in sharing more personal/sensitive information about themselves also translates into users being less inclined to engage in deception as they become more comfortable. Participant 'Mary' explained, saying in reference to their current status on the server, "if I made up some bullshit it would be immediately obvious" as a reason for being more truthful. This participant expected that if they were to be deceptive, that behavior would not only be evident but would also likely be called out by those who were familiar with the user, meaning that deception would not be a worthwhile investment of their time or energy. This is not to say, however, that they had not been deceptive in the past in the context they described, which was telling white lies to avoid conflict or saying they liked something to prevent the conversation from shifting negatively. Rather, they did not see value in being so in the future in this context given that they had since developed connections with others and provided other users a better understanding of who they were. Participant 'Bill' concurred, saying that engaging in further deception (beyond what they had already done) could be unadvisable since "people would eventually figure it out," expecting that being so connected to the group members would result in them understanding where deception was taking place. Since they are more comfortable with the group, these users are more motivated to share information about themselves that is truthful, out of a sense of trust and security with the other users.

### *Anonymity*

Anonymity refers to participants perceiving themselves as safer, and thus more comfortable, with sharing their information since they feel as if are in control of what is known about them. This comfort can result from the affordances of the platform partially or fully-concealing their offline identity, leading them to being more comfortable with sharing the information they so choose. This safety, in turn, creates an environment where the users do not feel they need to be actively deceptive moving forward, since they are free to pick and choose to share whichever information they like in a more selectively self-presenting way. The anonymity also allows users to choose not to engage if desired, such as ‘Joe,’ who said in relation to anonymity and Discord, “Difficult conversations can be extended as long as it takes me to come up with a response I’m happy with. If absolutely necessary, simply not responding is an option.” For this user, the ability to manage difficult discussions is a positive affordance provided them, especially as it allows them to omit information they do not wish to divulge or just outright ignore conversations. This ability to be selective about what is engaged with and shared also can lead to other users experiencing the group in a different way, such as ‘Pam’ who said, “I don’t think people lie very often, and most didn’t seem malicious” in relation to their fellow users. Another example comes from participant ‘Doug,’ who says, “I feel if you’re honest with people they’re more likely to be honest with you.” In their experiences, they do not believe that they have experienced much deception, although given that omission qualifies, that may not be entirely accurate.

Several users (n=7) also made clear that they appreciated the anonymity provided to them – however they perceived that – by the platform. User ‘Rick’ said, “Obviously if I know my online identity can be kept relatively anonymous here thats [sic] a boon to me,” showing that

they felt as if they were benefitted by having their identity kept as anonymous as possible. User 'Mitch' was similarly appreciative of the anonymity aspect, saying, "if i was not able to be anonymous on some level, I wouldn't share as much about work or my personal life." This statement shows outright that a lack of anonymity, even partial, would prevent the user from engaging as much due to a desire to maintain control over those personal components of their lives. In being able to omit certain pertinent information about themselves, they are able to feel more comfortable with sharing information and having conversations that otherwise would fall by the wayside.

Multiple participants (n=10) also mentioned that there was a greater sense of privacy, that being anonymous affected their sharing habits, that users can really control what to share or not, that having the ability to be anonymous let them share more personal information, and so on.

'Rick' also explained how this was beneficial, saying,

I have greater control over what I can say here. You can't have nuance in 120 characters or less. Here you can have some nuance, you can show what you said in the context of a conversation without an isolated tweet being parroted.

The idea of control was specifically mentioned by a few users (n=4), who placed considerable value on maintaining that aspect of their online lives. User 'Derek' agreed, saying, "privacy is something I value, as I like to be in control of my comfort levels." For these users, being in control of their information made them feel more at ease within the group and, thus, allowed them to feel as if they were freer to connect with others at their leisure. This control ties in with the idea of being able to selectively present as one chooses, with the ability to control the flow of information directly allowing users to omit or introduce whichever information they like into a conversation.

One user ('Cory') even went so far as to say that appreciated the platform because it made them "feel perfectly good sharing exactly what I'm comfortable with, no more, no less. It doesn't poke and prod you for more information, or to tell people about yourself or anything like that". This individualized comfort level, in turn, appeared to make the user feel as if they were more readily willing to engage as they choose with both the platforms and other users, given the fact that they were able to share as much or as little as they wanted with minimal to no pressure from any parties involved. In general, users believed that the platform gave them a sense of control over their information and, as a result, allowed them to present information about themselves as they chose, leading to likely more deception by omission but also a stronger willingness to connect and exchange selected information with other users as well.

### **Summary**

In summary, this study found six specific types of deception that participants engaged in: Information, Location, Books, Opinions, Minimal Deception, and Omission. All were done to achieve a particular kind of result. For Information, users would be deceptive about personal information (such as age or finances) in order to fit with a specific social group. Location involved deception about where users lived, which was attributed to a desire to remain safe. The category Books may be more server-specific in that it refers to users misrepresenting their reading habits, though this finding could transfer to other social platforms built on shared interests. The category of Opinions describes how users would be deceptive about their opinions – about books or political issues – in order to build rapport within a group or maintain their status in the group. Minimal Deception refers to participants minimizing the significance of the deceptions they had engaged in (e.g. white lies). Finally, Omission refers to users omitting details about themselves in order to fit in or maintain a certain image within the group.

Beyond types of deception, there were four broad themes that came to light. The first theme was Perception of Deception Affects Experience Doing So, meaning that the individual user's experience of deception is affected by how they perceive what they are doing. Within this theme, there were three sub-themes: Negative Perception, meaning that the users viewed deception negatively, which in turn affected them negatively as well; No Reaction, meaning that users reported not really caring about deception because they consider it to be a normal part of Internet culture; and Doesn't Count As Lying, meaning that the users did not believe that what they had done really counted as being deceptive. The second theme was Different Information Determines Deception Usage, meaning that different types of information – in this case, Basic Information vs. Sensitive Information – prompt different levels of deception, depending on how much of a risk the user believes they would be taking by divulging that type of information. The third theme was Deceiving Others to Fit In, which means that users will engage in deceptive practices in order to fit in with a social group online. The motivation for doing so ranged across the sub-themes of Acceptance (doing so in order to become accepted as a part of the group), Avoiding Negativity (being deceptive to avoid damaging group cohesion), and Concern For Others (being concerned about the effect their actions or words may have on other users). The last theme was Affordances and Audiences Determine Deceptive Practices, meaning that users deciding to be deceptive base their decisions on how they perceive the affordances of the platforms they use and the size of the audience, with more anonymity and smaller perceived audiences creating a context where deception feels less necessary.



## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

This study investigates how users experienced the process of engaging in deception with others, how they perceived multiple components of the online experience, including affordances and audiences, and how those impacted how they approached being deceptive and interacting with other users. This chapter synthesizes data from the results to answer the research questions proposed in chapter 3. Each research question will be discussed individually, and larger findings summed up after doing so. Following the discussion of the research questions and implications involved therein, the chapter will explore some limitations of the study and directions for future research.

### **RQ1: How do users experience the process of misrepresenting themselves to others?**

The answer to this research question is that users, in many cases, believed that being deceptive about anything online was simply part of the normal process of being in an online environment. These deceptions can be as simple as providing white lies, expressing an opinion that they did not actually have, or misrepresenting their reading history all the way to actively lying about their location or personal information to other users. These deceptions can even be users choosing to omit information about themselves to create a certain type of presentation. Research by Metts (1989) and Tenbrunsel & Messick (2004) explains the idea of omission of pertinent facts or information as part of the broader idea of deception. In that regard, the users selectively presenting themselves in such a way as to allow others to have an inaccurate perception of them is considered as engaging in deception, even if the users did not view it as such.

However, this belief was not universal among users and, in fact, participant responses ended up being separated into three distinct categories of thought: that lying or being deceptive is

bad, regardless of context, and thus warranted a negative internal reaction after doing so, that being deceptive is simply a component of being online that everyone makes use of and does not warrant any sort of reaction, or that they did not believe that what they had said and done really qualified as being deceptive since it was partially true or true within a specific light.

Considering first how users experience engaging in deceptive behaviors, nearly half of participants in this study simply considered online deception as something normal and, as a result, did not feel anything during or after being deceptive. Users called the experience they had after deceiving such things as ‘neutral’ and said that they had ‘[n]o real feelings one way or the other.’ For these users, their experience was simply something that they did and moved on from soon after, if not immediately. Being deceptive, when they deemed it necessary, was just part of how they interacted with others online and, thus, not worthy of any further examination or internal self-flagellation, so to speak. This follows with research from Naquin, Kurtzberg, & Belkin (2010) who explain that engaging online can lead or may result in a willingness to be more deceptive or unethical. Doing so makes users feel as if that kind of engagement is something that is accepted or normal, albeit not necessarily encouraged. With participants in this study referring to ‘the Internet’ as a nebulous space where deception toward others may not feel ‘real,’ the idea that being deceptive is simply a normal component of being online is given considerable weight as a concept.

Further, there were a few participants that did not even view their actions as being deceptive. These users give credence to the concept that users simply do not believe that they themselves lie all that often online (DeAndrea, Tom Tong, Liang, Levine, & Walther, 2012; DePaulo et al., 1996; Caspi & Gorsky, 2006). While they believe that others do – indeed, a few users outright said that they believed others might be deceptive while answering the questions –

they are not so inclined to put forward that they do the same. This finding aligns with a study from Drouin, Miller, Wehle, & Hernandez (2016) that shows people expect that others are going to lie or engage in deception in an online context, while also downplaying their own propensity to be deceptive. Toma, Hancock, & Ellison (2008) extend that idea further, saying that people in fact do *not* lie as often as others expect, due to internal constraints. It follows, then, that while some users expected that others would lie during the interviews, they not only made a point of explaining their deceptions but tried to minimize them as well. Participants trying to do so utilized such phrases as ‘I can't think of an instance off the top of my head’ or used terms such as ‘exaggerate’ or ‘minor white lies’ to explain what they had said, rather than describing their actions using words like ‘lie’ or ‘deceive’. For these users, they were not comfortable with the idea that they had engaged in deception and so sought to frame their actions in such a way as to make them unimportant or simply part of everyday communication. This sort of framing was able to be categorized as being ‘Minimal’ in terms of what type of deception the users used in their interactions with others.

Finally, the roughly-half of participants that experienced negative reactions either during or after doing so track with previous literature by DePaulo et al., (1996). With users feeling uncomfortable or senses of guilt or regret after being deceptive, they are following patterns that treat lying as negative, regardless of context. The unpleasant experiences, then, can affect how users choose to engage with others and how they feel about connecting within groups. These experiences also directly counter claims by Caspi & Gorsky (2006) who state that negative emotions (e.g. stress or tension) are lacking in the online deception process, though they do mention that ‘very few’ participants experienced those feelings, which is to say that those emotions are possible. This means that, in observing many participants experiencing these

negative emotions, it can be seen that participants can and do in fact feel bad or uncomfortable about engaging in deceptive practices, though it is something that occurs in roughly half the sample. However, this current project did focus specifically on how users responded to deception, rather than on deception as a broader concept with a discussion about the online environment, which could account for the difference in findings.

In specifically looking at the roughly-half of participants who mentioned the negative reactions to their own deception, those users all experienced similar negative emotions, such as guilt, regret, and discomfort, that closely tie into a sense of shame. For three or four users, the resulting negative emotions affected how they chose to – or if they chose to at all – engage in deceptive practices in the future, which tracks with Vasalou, Joinson, & Pitt (2006), who explain how those self-conscious emotions can and do translate into more pro-social behavior in the future. By experiencing these negative feelings, those users felt compelled to ‘correct’ their behavior so as to not feel that way again. Hence, two or three users felt as if they were unable to engage properly with other users within the group, while others felt as if they could no longer be a part of the group at all due to their actions. Phrases such as ‘lies are stupid, I won't lie like that again’ and ‘I rarely say anything anymore’ illustrate that some users have been so damaged internally by their deception that they have made changes to their lives that directly affect how they are going to operate within those contexts in the future. In short, what they said made them feel so unpleasant that they actively are avoiding either doing so or engaging with others from this point on.

**RQ2: How do users present themselves in online contexts in which they may not feel comfortable with portraying themselves fully?**

If users do not feel comfortable with fully expressing their identities, they are likely to engage in social curation behaviors such as refusing to engage with certain topics, keeping personal information private in order to maintain a particular type of presentation or, in some cases, even acting in ways counter to their internal beliefs.

To start with, slightly less than half of participants did mention that they engaged in filtering of what they said and did in order to better fit in with the group in question. This idea of filtering is in line with findings from Comello (2009) and McEwan (2015), who detail how users present different versions of themselves depending on who they believe they are interacting with in a specific context. Essentially, users are presenting themselves in such a way as to align with whatever audience they believe they are involved with. As well, according to Lewis (2001), there is the argument that “[users] have no “self” as such” and that how users present themselves is just them using “masks we wear in response to the social situations in which we find ourselves.” In other words, the ‘self’ is not a ‘real thing’ and when users attempt to portray that, they are simply switching to the personality or persona they feel is best suited for the situation at hand.

The idea, then, of participants not seeing what they did as deception may be a result of not seeing what they do as presenting a false version of themselves. With slightly less than half of users not feeling guilt or anything negative about the deceptions or, in a few cases, outright believing that they were not engaging in deception, they were also aligned with research from Fortin & Oliver, (2016), Michikyan, Dennis, & Subrahmanyam (2015), and Tracy & Tretheway (2005), all of whom put forward the idea that the users would not believe they would actually be deceiving others. Rather, they would see themselves as engaging in selective self-presentation of

specifically-chosen components of their identities. In other words, the users would not feel deceptive because they are simply engaging through a facet of themselves that they feel is best in the particular situation.

Beyond that, though, there were three or four participants that were so compelled to fit in with the social group that they actively engaged in counter-factual behavior in order to do so, such as making jokes they disagreed with or even supporting beliefs that contradicted what they actually felt to be true. Even though these behaviors were not what they either enjoyed or saw as accurate, they were willing to ignore whatever internal dissonance may have occurred in order to remain within the group. For these users, the need to be a part of the group overrode their ‘true self’ in favor of saying what was popular. This fits with research by Tsikerdekis & Zeadally (2014) who explain how people engage in deception to achieve certain goals. They wanted to be a part of the group, so they misrepresented themselves in order to achieve admission or acceptance.

However, most (n= 22) participants also generally did not notice negative responses from the other users, even though they were not being ‘authentic,’ as it were. For the group users, they appeared to either believe that the users were being truthful or, if they were not, did not say anything that indicated otherwise. This finding tracks with Marwick & boyd (2011) and their explanation of perceived authenticity having value regarding interacting with others. Similarly, those 22 participants mentioned how their deceptions were received as typically either positive or in the manner they intended or there was simply no reaction at all. Even those few users (n=5) who believed the reactions to be negative did not report that they were overwhelmingly so, instead choosing to use phrases such as ‘mild annoyance’ to describe the reaction. One participant, though, did explain a situation in which they entered a group and began presenting

themselves as an important user elsewhere (despite not being so), which violated group norms that expected new users to come in quietly and learn the group's type of interaction before engaging heavily, as well as appearing inauthentic due to outlandish social claims. They explained the reaction as being expressively negative, saying that the other users 'didn't exactly react positively like I thought they would since it turned out they were very hostile to me coming in like that without establishing myself firmly in the community first.' This statement absolutely gives credence to the ideas expressed by Donath & boyd (2004), Marwick & boyd (2014), and Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong (2008), who all mention how a 'vetting process' can oftentimes help users acclimate and become a part of the group through other users vouching for them.

The idea of curation of self also arises within the data, with several participants reporting simply not sharing information about themselves or opinions that ran counter to that of the group. This 'not sharing' of specific posts is consistent with research by Hogan (2010), whose findings explain that the users would be catering to the 'lowest common denominator' of fellow users. In other words, they only feel comfortable sharing basic information with other users, such as general location, age, and sex or gender. Ideas such as specific location, specific workplaces, and the like were considered to be too private to be able to share. This focus on privacy also extended beyond personal information to some certain opinions. Some participants explained that they choose not to discuss politics or opinions that could be considered controversial or even that simply run counter to those of the group, such as disliking a book universally-enjoyed within the group context. Some participants went beyond just avoiding politics into the realm of picking and choosing what they would not share about themselves, which fits with research about 'social curation' as an idea by Duh et al. (2012) and Hall & Zarro (2012). They wanted to feel as if they

were in control of their information and who is privy to what, which is similar to findings from Seitzinger (2014), who explains that control of individual information is something of value to most users. Without a sense of control over their information, users may engage in self-censorship to avoid such actions. As shown by participants, such self-censorship can include simply avoiding posting, including about political topics, which is supported by research from Das & Kramer, (2013), Hollenbeck & Kaikati (2012), Lang & Barton (2015), and Marder, Slade, Houghton, & Archer-Brown (2016). All of it leads to users simply feeling as if they cannot truly be themselves within the group context if they have any desire to fit in or stay a part of said group.

**RQ3: How do perceived norms and expectations within groups inform users' self-presentations?**

The third research question looks at how users experience group expectations and normative behavior and how those perceptions influence how users present themselves. The answer to this research question is that how users present themselves is affected by group norms and perceived expectations, with users possibly engaging in deception in order to present themselves in a positive light and as someone who can and should be accepted into the group. In doing so successfully, they become accepted members of the group, which in turn directs the group to maintain whichever direction it was already following, since individual input will follow the norms. Regardless of legitimacy or not, however, users are motivated to appear consistent in their behaviors.

To begin with, those three or four participants who willingly engaged in jokes and conversations that ran counter to their offline beliefs since those were behaviors being performed within the group and by the group. This is consistent with the SIDE Model (Postmes, Spears, &



Lea, 1998; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1999; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995; Sundar, 2015).

This theory details how, in group contexts, individuals tend to let their personal beliefs or understanding of societal norms become subordinated by the norms of the group in which they find themselves. Even though the group held different beliefs than the individual participants did offline, the individuals still took part in supporting said beliefs out of a sense of wanting to be accepted and continue the flow of the group.

Further, some of the participant experiences, especially those several users engaging in deception to fit in, help to extend some of the findings within the SIDE Model. First, although, when Dillon & Bushman (2015) and Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab (2005) explain how the group can be guided by input from its userbase, they do not account for those users who set their beliefs or desires aside for the good of the group, as many of the participants did, that behavior still means that the group is guided by the user base. It is just that it is guided by both those who are willing to speak up or who *already* help to form the group's identity *and* those who sublimate their beliefs and desire for the good of the group.

As well, participants that are willing to engage in deception in order to fit in are being pushed by social pressure (Zhou, 2011) to ascribe to the already-established order of things so as to be welcome within the group's dynamics. Even if they are not 'true believers' in whatever is being discussed, the fact that they are willing to adopt – at least publicly – the previously-extant group norms as their own within the group means that any growth that occurs is driven entirely by users, but also by the pre-existing structures that make up the group's member base. In effect, group members are not determining the direction of the group alone – the group itself and how it operates also contributes in doing so.

Perceived expectations of what the group does or will do in different situations also can factor into how users may choose to present themselves. Since research has shown that group members are likely to follow the norms of the group in which they find themselves (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Reicher, Postmes, & Spears, 2005), it stands to reason that users would also try to determine what the expectations of the group are in order to fit in. This is borne out in the data, as a few participants discussed their concerns with engaging in actions that ran outside the perceived boundaries of what the group expected. These ‘infractions’ even went so far as the participant being temporarily banned from the group due to criticism of a piece of work valued by the group. As a result, some participants (n>8) felt that it was necessary to engage in deception – or just not saying anything – simply to maintain membership within the group.

While some participants reached a point within the group where they were no longer willing to be deceptive, there were two participants who had intentionally misrepresented their beliefs and felt that they needed to continue to do so in order to maintain a sense of consistency in the presentation they provided the group. This sense of users deciding to be consistent in their actions lines up with prior research by Hogan (2010) and Seitzinger (2014). That being said, that research is predicated on the concept that individuals are going to be consistent with truthful information about themselves. That description would certainly not apply to the few participants who outright admitted to being deceptive and maintaining that type of deception in order to fit in and stay with the group. For those users, while they did value consistency of presentation, they were less concerned with that presentation being, to whichever extent they chose, manufactured to better foster a sense of acceptance of the users.

#### **RQ4: How do users' perceptions of who will view their information impact self-representation?**

Users reported feeling more comfortable with sharing personal information and presenting a more 'authentic'-seeming version of themselves in group contexts where they perceived there are smaller audiences. This comfort, however, does not ensure that users will not engage in deception. Rather, in the contexts, users may still use different types of deception (e.g. selective omission of personal information) to connect with others within the smaller perceived audience. This sort of presentation results from a fear of their private information being used against them and, as a consequence, makes users wary about providing certain information outside of a personally-vetted and experienced audience. In essence, users are interested in preventing their information from representing them in a way they do not prefer, even to the point of engaging in deception to stave off personal questions (e.g. lying to prevent another user from knowing exactly in which town said user resides).

By and large, participants (n=20) made clear that the size they perceive an audience having in a group context impacts both how they are willing to present themselves as well as how much they are willing to share about themselves. This extends from the idea that users build their perceptions of audiences based on experiences with others (Litt, 2012). For these users, seeing a certain number of names on the side panel of the server equals a potential number of other users that could see what they say and, as a result, they modify what they say to better manage those possible viewers. Doing so also tracks with research by Murumaa-Mengel (2017) and shows that users are going to build their presentations at least partially based on who they believe will be able to observe and interact with them.

Further, since users do tend to expect their audiences to have a certain makeup (e.g. size, demographics, etc.), they are likely to continue to tailor what they say and do with those audiences in mind, which follows with research by French & Bazarova (2017) and Kim, Lewis, & Watson (2018). Since users have a specific idea in mind for what their audiences are going to be like, it also stands to reason that they are going to want to interact with the audiences in ways that they feel most comfortable. For over half of participants, this means that they are going to keep particular information private or omit specific details about themselves when interacting with others. These participants explained that it was odd or uncomfortable for them to divulge detailed information about themselves, such as their place of employment or sharing pictures of themselves, with a group that was ostensibly as large as the different servers appeared to be. Other reasoning by four or five participants was that, since the majority of the members of the audience were users they would never interact with, the personal information was not something of which they needed to be in possession.

Similarly, about a quarter of participants were also noticeably concerned about the prospect of specific information being used to affect how they presented themselves and were perceived by others. This reticence to share personal information or beliefs aligns with research by Kwon, Moon, & Stefanone (2015) and Van Kleek et al. (2015), which explains that people, out of fear of negative retaliation or similar consequences, will change how they self-present in order to avoid said repercussions. Participants' experiences fit with this, as evidenced by how users have disengaged from conversations or even entire social groups after expecting to be socially-damaged. This also illustrates potential motivation for why users engage in deception in the group context, especially given that they are looking to fit in. In those contexts, they are trying to maintain their self-presentation in relation to others.

However, several users, when mentioning audience size, did not show a concern or worry about the potential of context-collapse with their audiences. This aligns with most research on context collapse (specifically Marwick & boyd, 2011, 2014) that states that users typically underestimate the size of their potential audiences and tend to feel safe with their expected smaller audiences. Partially resulting from this perception of their audiences and partially due to the perception of being able to be anonymous to varying degrees (as addressed in RQ5) , users will generally provide more and more detailed information about themselves as they are safe in the knowledge that only a select few individuals will be able to see it, which can lead to context collapse and the potential audiences expanding rapidly (in the case of viral posts). That being said, participants felt that smaller perceived audiences made them feel more comfortable with sharing information, which does track with that same previous research on context collapse.

**RQ5: How do perceived affordances impact how users feel they can engage in deceptive practices?**

The last research question considered how users felt they were able to misrepresent themselves or deceive others based on what they perceived to be the affordances of the platform they were using. The answer to this research question is that users – when within a proper context – were able to feel more comfortable with the group at large and, as a result, felt less inclined to engage in deceptive practices. However, if faced with the need to do so, users were also more motivated to simply share less information about themselves (deception by omission) rather than actively engage in misinformation with the other users.

Close to half of participants showed that they what levels of anonymity and control over personal information they believed the platform provided them. With these perceived affordances, many participants believed that the information they were sharing would be kept

more private and with a smaller audience that they trusted. Further, they felt more inclined to be ‘authentic’ or share true information – and by extension, less false information – for similar reasons. As well, having more control over what they were able to share added more willingness to engage truthfully.

In terms of users perceiving the control they had over their own information, again roughly half of participants (n=12) were comforted by what they believed they could do with the platform, which included being able to omit or be deceptive about information as they chose. Using such features as the direct message system and user-determined screen names, participants were pleased with their ability to stay as anonymous as they chose, which was of great importance to several of them. Multiple participants expressed a displeasure at some social media platforms’ insistence at making them offer up personal details such as name, location, and other information they may have preferred to keep to a small group of people, if not completely private. They preferred to be able to offer information they so choose to present as they liked, which follows with research by Fortin & Oliver (2016). By being able to present the information they feel is necessary, participants were able to be deceptive about themselves in such a way as to not appear to be doing so, therefore likely ignoring negative consequences from the group itself.

Regarding deceptive practices, though, while some (n=7) participants honestly felt as if they did not have a need – or at least as much of one – to use active deception within the smaller groups, there was still the prevalence of making use of passive deception and omission while in those groups. Users were more inclined, if necessary, to share less information about themselves than they normally would have, in the service of allowing others to gain a particular perception of who they were and, thus, hopefully fitting in with the group. It also bears mentioning that

users were also more likely to share true information about themselves, rather than engaging in deceptive practices, because they felt as if the group was more ‘worthy,’ so to speak, of receiving that information and that they were safer in doing so within that group.

In looking at the findings in relation to the research questions (specifically RQ4 and RQ5), it becomes clear that these multiple components of the online experience interact to help motivate users to behave in particular ways. Specifically, users’ practice of integrating deceptive behaviors into their online experience are predicated on how they view their potential experiences. These perceived contexts, then, help users determine whether or to what extent they engage in deceptive practices within the social groups.

### **Contributions to Research**

This study is consistent with much of the established research regarding online deception. One such idea is that users do prefer a smaller environment in which to operate and tend to perceive their audiences as being smaller. Another is that users do appreciate being able to control their own information, even to the point of making use of anonymity to present themselves as they desire. A third concept that is consistent with the findings here is that users will engage in deception in order to be accepted by and fit in with a specific group. All this research provided a solid foundation from which this study could expand and, with the findings aligning with the extant literature, the study was able to grow to address new concepts and bring them to the larger body of research.

This project provides two main unique insights into how people engage with one another in online communities: that perceived affordances and perceived audiences work in concert to guide users’ decisions about what they share and how they deceive and that users may use those affordances in certain ways to actively deceive others, even to the point of working against their

own actual beliefs, in order to fit or maintain their status within a group. These perceived affordances, within the context of Discord, cover a range of ideas from an environment that is smaller and more intimate to a perceived base of users that is smaller than other social platforms to a quicker pace and style of conversation to even providing users the ability to only offer what information they choose and, by extension, user-chosen levels of anonymity. All of these affordances served to provide the participants a different style of interaction and different options for how to present themselves to other users.

In looking at what this study contributes to research, the first of these ideas – that of perceived affordances and audiences working together – is perhaps the most meaningful, in that the findings show that neither component operates in a vacuum. Rather, the two parts combine to influence how users choose to engage, or not engage, with other users in whichever group is in question. How users perceive they are able to use a certain platform (in this case, Discord) and what it allows them to do directly affects the way that they perceive the size of the potential audience (e.g. a more private server will equate to a smaller audience). This, in turn, affects how they choose to share their information, how they interact with others, and whether or not they choose to engage in deceptive practices.

In order to provide more information, users have to reach a level of comfort with the group and its users, though this requires multiple perceptive stages to be reached. These stages are another contribution to the field by this project since, by looking at how perceived affordances and perceived audiences work together to affect user behavior, we are able to see a decision-making process in effect. First, users need to perceive that the platform allows for smaller sizes of audiences. Second, users have to perceive that the audiences they are engaging with actually *are* smaller. From there, they need to interact with others to see where they fit in



with the group and gain a sense of what the expectations of the group are in terms of behavior and interactions. At that point, users can either develop that sense of comfort with the group, leading to sharing more and more truthful information over time, or they can decide that being deceptive will serve them better in terms of connecting with others.

This ‘comfort-building’ process can also be affected by how affordances help users perceive the group dynamic. This means that users develop a sense of comfort and fitting in with the group as they learn to navigate who the other users within the group are and how they interact with one another. In short, users learn about how the group works through observing and interacting with those group members. These technological affordances (such as anonymity, audience size, or privacy) – at least how they are perceived – then, also contribute to understanding that group dynamic so as to work within it more effectively. In order to get a sense of who the other group members are, users first have to build a perception of how users are able to interact and what about the platform allows them to do so. Such a perception is created through what users see as being available to users. For example, in Discord, some groups are accessible via this open links while others are invitation-based. There are also rooms within the server that can be dedicated (e.g. a room only for the authors of the group where bloggers cannot see). Therefore, if a user notices that entrance into the group comes via invitation or that there are certain places reserved for different types of members, that user can begin to build an idea of how the group works before even engaging. In taking those perceptions into account, the user could see that the group is designed to be more private and likely to have a dynamic that reflects that, as well as that different types of users tend to form sub-groups more designed for specific interactions.

As well, the extent to which these perceived affordances matter to a community member depended on the context. These contexts can be anything from how much of an effect that users feel lurkers have on their posting habits, to how users choose to define their audiences, to even whether or not the persistence factor of the platform affects what users posts. For some participants, they saw the server population only mattering when people were active online and engaged in conversation. For them, lurking did not matter, and they did not consider those users to be an area of concern. In that context, the perceived affordance of allowing active users to be seen or have priority in the sidebar led users to view only those users and consider them when they were deciding whether to be deceptive or not. However, for those users who did consider lurkers as part of the potential audience, that could have an effect on how they choose to engage. Further, the idea of persistence as relates to posts – meaning that inactive users could log on and access the entire chat history – was not something that any participant mentioned as being a part of mental calculations in terms of whether they chose to be deceptive or not. That being said, considering the idea of persistence mattering also could mean that what people view as ‘their audience’ in a given context may only be considered in terms of immediacy, rather than a longer-term view of their audience.

The other idea, which deals with people engaging in deceptive practices that outright contradict how they actually feel or believe, shows the extent to which being accepted by a group or fitting in influences how people choose to engage with others. While people being deceptive in order to fit in is not an uncommon concept and is one that stands to reason and with previous research, the fact that, in some circumstances, people will outwardly speak against, make jokes about, or condemn something they believe in goes beyond what is commonly known. For those users, being a part of the group and maintaining their relationships with group members was so

important to them and who they believed themselves to be online that they were willing to betray, in a sense, their offline belief systems in service of being accepted. This shows that social pressures – both spoken and unspoken – have an impact on how people choose to share about themselves and connect with others beyond simply encouraging users to omit information about themselves. Instead, for some users, truly contradicting themselves is a valid expression of connectivity, particularly in an online context where the ability of users to be deceptive is extended by what the platform allows in terms of anonymity and self-presentation. In short, users can present themselves in certain ways more easily on an anonymous platform because it is less likely that their deceptions will be exposed since they control their individual flow of information.

Between both of these concepts, it becomes evident that why and how users connect and engage with one another online is influenced by the presence of both perceived affordances and perceived audiences and particularly in the significant interaction between the two of them and how they affect users. How users see their potential audiences through the lens of what a platform allows them directly affects what they choose to say about themselves and whether or not they choose to engage in deception, especially in relation to how they view the norms and expectations of the group and what is required in order to fit in with the group. These ideas, in short, provide insight into what drives users to engage with others and, in some cases, deceive others in service of creating a sense of connection with those users.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of the study is that the Discord server, at the time of the data collection, was dying out, with users leaving in considerable amounts. This fits as a limitation in that the data being collected from the participants may not have been an accurate reflection of the

experiences of users on the server as a whole. While a good cross-section of users – from those about to leave to those fully-entrenched in the server – was taken as participants, that sample also brings about potential questions of if these experiences and deceptions are accurate representations of their experiences, given that some participants may have viewed the community in a more negative light (hence leaving). That being said, all participants recruited for this study had been members of the server recently, with 12 having left the server one to two weeks prior to data collection. Participants had joined the Discord server between two months and four years prior to interviewing, meaning they had experience within the server and interacting with others in that context.

Another limitation of the study is that the interviews were targeted to explore users' experiences with a specific platform (that being Discord). This platform provides – or appears to provide – a certain type of interaction to its users, such as an ideally-anonymous messaging system, voice chat, and direct messaging. With that being the case, and with the platform having so many unique components involved in the user experience, it is possible that the conclusions drawn from the interviews could only apply to said specific platform, meaning that the findings may not fit with other communities. For example, communities based on Reddit would not utilize certain affordances that Discord does, even if the community base is the same. Reddit does not operate in a 'real time' fashion and is more of a message board than a conversation. In that respect, the interactions that place are going to be different, as there are other affordances that exist on Reddit, such as post vetting and moderation, that similarly do not exist in Discord. These differences can be extended to all social media platforms, such as Facebook (assumed lack of anonymity), Twitter (audience potential size is massive), or others. Essentially, these findings

could be argued to be specific to this community (especially given that some deception was involving book opinions).

That being said, though, these affordances may not entirely be unique to Discord. One can look at how persistence matters with Twitter and Facebook – particularly considering the prevalence of others going through post histories to find ‘objectionable material’ – as well as how audiences are viewed differently even within Discord and likely similarly outside the specific platform to see that there is room to expand these ideas. Further, these findings could also apply to broader issues, particularly if the larger motivations behind deception and perception have an impact on how those deceptions took place. However, broader participant experiences showed that aspects such as audience size and anonymity did impact, on a larger scale, how users choose to share information, with these features not being platform-exclusive to Discord. This could mean that, despite the questions covering one specific social media environment, what users experience and desire out of their online platforms could be more universally-considered.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In terms of how what was found in this study could be expanded on in the future, there are multiple paths which could be explored. To begin with, studies could be run discussing a range of social media platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) and examine how those platforms provide (or potentially provide) different experiences and expectations by users and how those are impacted by the specific platforms. For example, the anonymity of Discord perceived by users would not be present when utilizing Facebook which, in turn, could affect how users decide what to share about themselves when faced with the potential of ‘real life’ consequences.

Another area of research could gather and examine demographic information (e.g. age, race, gender, etc.) and consider how those identity components any number of the ideas discussed in this study, such as how those pieces of users' lives impacts what they choose to share and how the perceptions surrounding audiences and affordances intersect with them to create a different style of engagement. It is entirely possible that any number of the facets that make up identity could directly change how people choose to engage with one another online. Specifically considering race or gender, those aspects may very well affect if someone chooses to share information or how much a part of a specific group they feel.

Another area of research can be examining why participants were so honest about their deceptions or perceived lack of deception. Several participants were open about what they did deceptively and their motivations behind doing so, while even those that did not view their actions as deceptive explained why they did not view them in that way. There is room to look at what motivated them to be honest about how they saw their engaging in deceptive behavior, especially given that there is considerable research showing that people often do not interpret their behavior as deceptive online (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; DeAndrea et al., 2012; DePaulo et al., 1996). While such perception could be contextual, based on the platform, these perceptions could also be more broadly considered.

Further, prior research by Hancock (2012) and Taddicken (2014) has found that users are often more honest because their posts are persistent – or lasting – and easily searchable by employers and others, As a result, users are more reticent to create a paper trail of deception, so to speak. This, though, was not borne out in the instance of this study. What is interesting in this specific instance is that multiple participants for this study reporting being honest when they did not need to be, especially given that the affordances of the platform would have allowed them to

easily be deceptive with no tangible consequences. Further research could be done on exactly what prompted the participants to be so honest in a context where there was for seemingly no penalty in not being so.

The last area of research that could be explored would consider why so many users felt no reaction or neutral toward their own use of deceptive practices. Beyond the idea of ‘it’s just the Internet’ and the inherent internal dehumanization of other users behind that concept, that sort of non-reactivity is fascinating in comparison to those users who felt negative emotions. While the sample population could have been fairly disparate in terms of the way users approach the world, such a wide split between ‘negative’ reactions and ‘no’ reactions bears consideration, particularly in relation to those few users who actively did not believe they engaged in deception at all, despite having said and done things that were untrue.

## CONCLUSION

In general, this project provides insight into how people interact with one another in an online group context. To sum up the findings from the research questions, in considering how perceived affordances interact with perceived audiences to affect how users present themselves, perhaps the main takeaway is that what users believe the platforms they use allow them to do affects what they believe about the audiences they may interact with. Typically, if users believe that the platform allows for a smaller, more private setting, they will expect that the audience they will be interacting with will be smaller and, thus, they will be more likely to share information as the audience will be more trusted. This, however, is no guarantee, as two participants misrepresented themselves to fit in with the group and now feel as if they have to continue deceiving in order to remain consistent. That fact means that, even though the smaller size does encourage more truthful interactions, it does not ensure that all users adhere.

By and large, though, the investment of trust in the audience leads to users feeling the desire to fit in with the group, since the group members are valuable to them, which can make users motivated to meet the expectations of the group norms. This, ultimately, can mean that users will engage in deceptive practices in these groups to maintain the relationships as a direct result of how users see the platform and the audiences involved, even if these deceptive practices can result in negative internal feedback, though that is not a certainty.

In other words, the type of platform being used affects the perceived or expected size and type of audiences with whom users can engage which, in turn, affects the type of conversations users are willing to have. These perceived audience sizes can also affect what users perceive to be the expectations or norms of the group which can, again, result in making use of deceptive practices – even to their own psychological detriment – to fit with the larger group.



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## APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you been a member of this community? What brought you to r/fantasy on Discord? (*introductory*)
2. What are the main things you find yourself doing on this platform?
  - a. What do you tend to post?
  - b. What do you choose not to post?  
What keeps you from posting these things?
  - c. How do you decide what information to share about yourself?
  - d. How do you decide what not to share?
3. Who do you think reads your posts?
  - a. How does this audience influence what you choose to post?
4. What impression do you think other Discord users have of you?
  - a. What impression do you *want* them to have of you?
5. Tell me about the situation where you said something about yourself you knew was not true.
  - a. What motivated you to say what you said?
  - b. How do you think it was received by the people in that discussion?
6. How did you feel while you were saying this?
  - a. How did you feel afterward?
  - a. How did this situation affect your feelings about the people you interact with online?
7. What would happen if you were say something similar in a different online space?
  - a. What is it about Discord that made you feel you could say this?
  - b. How do you think the features of this platform impact what you choose to share about yourself?
8. What do you think is most important for researchers studying online communities to understand about the people who participate in them? (*concluding*)

## **APPENDIX B. RECRUITMENT PROTOCOL**

Aaron C. Cross, Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Communication at North Dakota State University, is conducting a study on online identity, group norms, and how users present themselves in different contexts online.

In order to participate in the interview process, you must meet the following criteria:

1. Eighteen years of age or older.
2. If you have said online something about yourself that you knew not to be true.

If you meet these criteria, please contact user ACCross#9416 for a time and date that best fits your schedule. You will be contacted to verify the time and date before the interview session.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information, please contact me at [aaron.cross@ndsu.edu](mailto:aaron.cross@ndsu.edu).

Thank you,

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## APPENDIX C. LIST OF PARTICIPANT PSEUDONYMS

Ian  
Erica  
Pam  
Derek  
Rob  
Tyler  
Jennifer  
Taylor  
Doug  
Adrian  
Sonya  
Rick  
Alfred  
Cory  
Mary  
Mitch  
Joe  
Arnold  
Carrie  
Jake  
Adam  
Bill  
Carl  
Tom  
Mario  
Kevin  
Eli