

Spring 2016

What Are You Going to Do With That Degree?: How Communication Majors' Report and Perform Identity Talk

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What Are You Going to Do With That Degree?:
How Communication Majors' Report and Perform Identity Talk
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April 4th, 2016

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Acknowledgements

I owe my deepest gratitude to the following people who made this thesis possible and a great academic and personal experience...

David Boromisza-Habashi ~ I thank David for being the calming force during this process as he edited several drafts and talked me through several early morning meetings. I am truly grateful that David took me under his wing and shared his incredible intelligence with me. I am proud to produce a project that reinforces why the communication major matters and how it can be approved upon in the future.

Cindy White ~ It would have been next to impossible to complete the honors process without Cindy's constant guidance and encouragement. She is a role model to me in all respects and I hope that someday I can guide and inspire people the way she does for me. Cindy has helped me understand the power of communication scholarship and motivated me to be a part of the academic conversation.

Naomi Rachel ~ I cannot thank Dr. Rachel enough for her high expectations of my writing and involvement as a student at the university. I thank her for both her critiques and praise that have pushed me to be a better writer and student. Dr. Rachel has been incredibly helpful throughout the year with her continuous support.

My fellow honors students ~ Our time together this year has inspired and strengthened my love for learning. Through their consistent and support, Alexis, Tyler, Jessica, and Sarah drove me to be better with every class session we experienced together.

Julie & Bill Feeney ~ I thank my parents for their incredible emotional and financial support during my time at the University of Colorado, Boulder. I am so grateful they let me learn and experience the academic world on my own. The college experience they have allowed me to have is irreplaceable. I appreciate everything they do for me and am so proud to represent our family in Colorado.

Kevin Mulligan ~ The amount of drafts and conversations he has willingly looked over and endured is countless and I am extremely thankful for his support. I couldn't have worked so hard this year without his reassurance and love.

Feeney, Madeline (B.A., Communication)

What Are You Going to Do With That Degree?:

How Communication Majors' Report and Perform Identity Talk

Thesis directed by Professor David Boromisza-Habashi

Abstract

Although research has been conducted on student identity development and various academic majors in higher education, much of this work has focused on student experience of majors in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math). Very little research has considered how students in non-STEM fields identify with their major or understand the role of their major in society. Communication as a field of study has become an increasingly popular major, and communication skills are often cited as very important for personal and professional success (Schmitt, 2014; Katriel & Philipsen, 1981). However, the communication major has often been criticized in society and treated as a less prestigious major (Carpenter & McEwan, 2013). The current qualitative study sets out to reveal how students majoring in communication performed their academic and personal identities through talk. This project entailed 12 semi-structured interviews with communication majors at a large, public university to investigate how these students make sense of their choice of major and how they communicate a unique sense of identity. The findings suggest that students strategically positioned their identities, expressed strong pride about their major choice, and experienced personal growth through achieving better communication. Each theme provides insight into the contradictions students experience around the communication major both in and outside of the academic world, such as being valued in some contexts and criticized in others.

Key words: communication major, identity talk, academic identity, personal identity, contradictory discourse, value of communication

Chapter 1: Literature Review & Rationale

Introduction

“What are you going to do with that degree?” The reaction is the same as friends, family and employers find out I am studying communication in college. I have perfected my answer as I am now a senior and have gained confidence in my communication studies. Even so, a major becomes a large part of an upper class student's identity as they are taking mostly classes in the discipline and working towards graduation. I have found that I do not simply major in communication; I have become a communication major that brings a mixed identity of being valued in certain contexts and undervalued in others. The choice to major in communication, just like the choice of any major, has shaped the way I talk about my education, myself as a learner, and my personal identity overall.

Student enrollment in colleges rose 37% from fall of 2000 to fall of 2010 as a college education has become a vital part of emerging adulthood in the United States (National Center on Education Statistics, 2013). Since both college education and the choice to major in communication are increasing in popularity for students across the country (Schmitt, 2014), it is worthwhile to explore how communication students navigate their place both in the university and society. A specific focus on communication is valuable particularly because, as I explain below, communication majors are caught between two contradictory beliefs in US society: communication is valuable, but the value of the study of communication is questionable. A combination of literature on identity, the communication discipline and contradictory discourses around the major guided this research project on communication students' multi-faceted identities. I reviewed key concepts of self and academic identity to highlight the importance of identity talk and language as identity expression, specifically among communication students in

college. After the introduction of these concepts, a discussion about the communication major at a large research university and contradictions around the major formed research questions.

Previously conducted exit interviews were examined to determine what needed further investigation. Then, in-depth interviews with communication students and thematic analysis will contribute to the academic conversation around personal and academic identities in emerging adults.

Identity & Identity Development

Reflection on the nature of identity is a popular topic for researchers across a variety of disciplines because of its impact on an individual's actions, thought processes, and society overall. The timeless "who am I?" question has been a central inquiry in biology, philosophy, psychology and communication theory as it tackles the complicated human quest for self-discovery (Carbaugh, 1996). Before diving into the complexity of identity development among college-aged students, it is crucial to understand the general concept of identity. This section will review scholarship on basic identity and development, identity as social performance and identity work.

Identity itself has multiple levels encompassing both personal and social aspects (Tracy & Robles, 2013). Identity refers to an individual's goals and beliefs, roles in society and group memberships developing into a sense of personal and cultural uniqueness (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, as cited in Schwartz, 2013). Today, popular discourses of identity have extended from idioms of biological and psychological identity to include idioms of cultural and social identity (Carbaugh, 1996). Researchers state that identity is a fundamentally communicative process related to "membership in and perceptions of particular social groups or identity categories" (Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013). The expansion of the concept of identity to cover

social and cultural categories makes the university a noteworthy space of study. The university is of significant interest because it is host to a social scene featuring diverse social identities belonging to students who attend the university with the intention to learn and grow. Individuals claim identity by their verbal and non-verbal expression and, with those expressions, form accounts of who they are. In the case of student identity, it makes sense to think of identity existing at two different levels: the personal and academic level. The personal level of identity refers to individuals' self-concept and sense of self-worth (Hecht et al., 2004). Self-worth is significant in students as they begin to develop their learner identity and student personality. Self-identity can be defined as "an individual's own notion of who and what they are" (Watson, 2008, p. 131).

Identity development, in both a personal and academic sense, is especially prevalent for students as they enter and progress through higher education institutions for several reasons (Kaufman, 2014). First, the university provides a unique environment where students have academic freedom to make their own decisions and shape their emerging adult experience. The school and academic setting function as a discourse community and exert agency for identity to be influenced and formed by exposure to different ideas and experiences (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002). With the increase in the number of students attending college, the university experience sets the groundwork for a person's future, including their continuously evolving self-identity (Lairio, Puukari & Kouvo, 2013). Second, the university brings about a sense of "academic identity" among individuals enrolled in an educational institution. Researchers have found that this aspect of identity is constructed through the college culture, including academic courses, interaction with peers and professors, and exposure to the higher education system overall (Lairio, Puukari & Kouvo, 2013). A student's academic identity entails the commitment to one's

discipline, institutional participation, and academic freedom defining the student and their "way of being" in the college environment (Lairio, Puukari, & Kouvo, 2013, p. 118). This academic freedom refers to students' conscious choice to be a certain type of student, study a particular field, and being trusted to manage one's own priorities and work (Henkel, 2005). Therefore, both the institution and the individual are responsible for identity formation and development.

The identity presentation process consists of multiple factors, including talk, interaction, and enactment. The enacted aspect of identity manifests itself through actual communication, interaction and actions. Enacted identity occurs when students are communicating about their experiences, opinions, and thoughts in a way that casts them as a particular type of person. Tracy and Robles (2013) explain the importance of how identities shape talk and vice versa since people are embedded in various communities and communicate their belonging through discourse. In the process of presenting identities, speakers also attempt to maintain face when face threats emerge in interactions or when speakers anticipate face threats (Tracy & Robles, 2013). This could be significant when applied to how students speak about their academic identities, as there is a contradictory cultural discourse around the value of communication in US society. Communication as an activity is highly valued, but it is devalued as an object of study. This means that students may present and perform their identity in a specific way to justify their decision and maintain face in front of others. Based on Tracy and Robles's (2013) logic, communication students' identities shape the way they communicate about their academic experience just as the talk around the communication major shapes who they are as students. This identity shaping takes place constantly as social actors engage in interaction and conversation (Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013).

Erving Goffman famously described identity as a communicative performance. This performance occurs when an actor is presenting him or herself to a social scene (Carbaugh, 1996). Goffman demonstrated how "selves are fundamentally subjects in social presentations" (Goffman as cited in Carbaugh, 1996, p. 25) and, therefore, an aspect of all communicative actions and events is the presentation of self (Carbaugh, 1996). This dramaturgical approach to identity focuses on performance encompassing all activity of an individual on a social stage or in a cultural scene. There are a number of ways people present their various identities, including talk, physical appearance, dress, etc. The presentation of self is not limited to verbal expression, but the use of language for identity expression will be the focus of this study because I am interested in how communication students verbally report and perform identity through interviews and exit surveys.

An important aspect, and current research focus, of identity enactment is termed identity work. Identity work adds to Goffman's concept that "people perform in a way to announce and enact who they are" (Beech, 2008). Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) explain how all talk involves active and strategic enactments of identity and that identity formation is a constant process. Self-identity is created through identity regulation, practices of defining identity, and identity work, the activity involved in presenting identity to others (Alvesson & Wilmott as cited in Beech, 2008). The research states, "people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising" their sense of self (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002).

Other authors build on this evolving definition of identity work adding that an individual's end goal is to shape a coherent and distinct self-concept (Watson, 2008). Identity work translates directly into how individuals express who they are on both a personal and academic level. Identity work often arises out of at least small amounts of self-doubt or

skepticism out of interactions with others (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002). In this case, the self-doubt a student may experience could arise out of their particular major choice due to the contradictory discourse around the value of the communication major. At the launch of this study, I anticipated that self-doubt could be especially significant for communication majors through expressions of self-doubt in the presentation of the communication major identity. Speakers use language by selecting and deselecting certain words, descriptions and expressions to construct or perform their identities (Kitzinger & Mandelbaum, 2013); this focus on language makes 'identity talk' especially important when looking at participants' language use. Beech (2008) explains, "In any particular encounter, there is the shadow of encounters past and the foreshadow of encounters yet to come and so identity work may be a *mélange* of different identity projects, co-present within the self but distinct and potentially conflicting" (p. 52). I am specifically interested in how communication majors engage in identity projects to make sense of their own identity and role in society.

In addition to identity work, there has been research conducted to explore how students' identities are formed and developed during the transition to adulthood. Erik Erikson (1950) was a lead researcher advocating that identity development is a main challenge in young adulthood. The challenge includes the beliefs and values people bring into their individuality. More recent research has built on Erikson's studies identifying the period between adolescence and adulthood, ages 18-25, as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). These emerging adulthood years are characterized by change, exploration and, in developed countries, the opportunity to obtain higher education that will shape the rest of their lives (Arnett, 2000). The crucial ages emphasized in identity development encompass the typical period students are enrolled at the university.

Lairio, Puukari, and Kouvo (2013) investigated this idea by studying how students answered the open-ended survey question "how do you see your time as a student from the perspective of life construction?" The researchers gathered 283 responses from Finnish speaking undergraduates. The majority of responses explained how students believe that the university plays an instrumental part in personal and academic identity development. These results are consistent with studies on undergraduate students in the UK and their identity development (Lairio, Puukari, & Kouvo, 2013, p. 121). Regardless of the country or group of undergraduate students, identity development has been a topic of conversation for years in academic research. College is critical in preparing students for a professional lifestyle and helps students develop an overall identity as it allows for both personal and social identity growth (Kaufman, 2014). Although research on identity work and identity communication has been conducted in the past, it has yet to focus specifically on college students in the communication major.

Socialization in Student Identity Development

Although, college's impact on student development is often studied from cognitive or psychological perspectives, it can also be seen as a social experience (Kaufman, 2014). Taking a social perspective allows the researcher to highlight the social aspect of attending college. Weidman's 1989 model of undergraduate socialization incorporates the importance of norms, social relationships, interpersonal, and intrapersonal relationships in academic contexts (Weidman, DeAngelo & Bertha, 2014). Kaufman confirms Weidman's original model in his research indicating that identity development involves communal culture, rather than being solely an individual experience (2014). This is applicable to student identity development because a college or university acts as the communal entity in higher education. Since schooling has continued to evolve since Weidman's model in 1989, researchers set out to assess if the

model is still accurate in today's academic culture. Weidman, DeAngelo & Bethea did this by identifying seventeen research studies published between 2003 and 2014 that explicitly used Weidman's model to successfully guide their research. For example, a study by Antonio (2004) used the Weidman model to focus on college peer groups as a source of informal socialization and how this changes intellectual identity and degree aspirations (Weidman, DeAngelo & Bethea, 2014).

Identity work does not only unfold on a personal level, but also contributes to the creation of a 'social identity' (Watson, 2008). Personal goals, values and beliefs are often influenced by cultural and social orientations (Schwartz et al., 2003). Socialization and the community environment are worthwhile approaches for investigating student identity development. Reflection on the social sphere of identity development reveals that social identity and group characteristics and beliefs play a crucial part in identity development. In the academic world, this social sphere of identity can be found in the institution overall, the department or the major itself. One particular way students utilize their freedom at the university is by choosing the course of study they want to pursue. The Weidman framework explains how students are exposed to ideas, opinions and perspectives within specific academic fields of study and majors (Weidman, DeAngelo & Bethea, 2014). The framework reflects undergraduate socialization processes, such as entering college with values and goals, being exposed to socializing influences, and then evaluating normative pressures to develop an academic identity. A student becomes a "learner" through pursuing a major, which forms a narrower identity than simply "student." The concept of "learner identity" explains how an individual student feels about himself or herself as a learner, which feeds into self-image and overall academic and personal identity (Lawson, 2013).

In addition, Holmegaard, Ulriksen and Madsen (2014) conducted a longitudinal, qualitative study on student's choices through higher education and found that choosing what to study is a complex, continuous and social process, instead of an isolated event. The analysis demonstrated expressions of students' choice or limitation to choose a field became either a strictly individual or solely social decision. Some students tried to resist guidance from parents, peers and counselors as it was seen as an individual task, but the majority based their decisions off family members career paths, interest and attractive future careers.

Henkel (2005) sums up most research in this area by stating that academic identities are, "formed and sustained upon individual and collective values, sense of meaning and self esteem in the academic profession" (Henkel, 2005, p. 155). The choice a learner makes in their academic career, including their pursuit in major, brings different perceptions and realities during college. These choices lead to a "social-identity," which Watson (2008) defines as "cultural, discursive or institutional notions of who or what an individual might be" (p. 131).

Since identity development relies heavily on major choice, emerging adults (i.e. college students) may be influenced by their immediate and distant surroundings to choose a certain academic major over another. This research aids the aim to uncover how the communication major can specifically shape personal and academic identity. The research discussed thus far has considered processes of identity development, the connection between identity and talk, and the influence of college environment and major choice on self and learner identity. This project seeks to extend thinking about student identity to consider how the specific type of major a student chooses is related to personal identity and how that choice shapes the identities a student can claim. A discussion on different types of academic majors offered will provide a context of

identity development within a specific area. The two relevant academic categories include science/technology/engineering/mathematic categorized majors and social science majors.

Different types of academic majors

There are countless variations of programs offered at schools small and large across the United States. The research on academic majors and college students has primarily focused on differences between students who pursue different majors. There are several ways to look at student choices such as connecting these decisions to personality traits or academic perceptions of different disciplines. Students develop a sense of identity within their major that will continue onto a professional identity, impacting the way they engage in learning (Reid, Dahlgren, Petocz, & Dahlgren, 2008). Student choice of majors have been narrowed down to out-of-school factors (parents, high schools), in-school (classmates, classes) and personality type factors that are all highly influential (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, & Madsen, 2014). Holmegaard et al. have utilized the expectancy-value model to identify how expectancy for success and beliefs or values influences students' choices (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, Madsen, 2014). There has been a specific emphasis on the contrast between STEM and social science majors because of these beliefs and perceptions. STEM majors consist of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, & Madsen, 2014).

Holmegaard, Madsen and Ulriksen (2014) investigated why students interested in science and math in high school did not end up pursuing a STEM major once they entered college. Their results revealed many students did not choose STEM majors because of the perceived rigidity and narrowness of the major would not contribute to students' desired academic identity (Holmegaard, Madsen, & Ulkirksen, 2014). Perez, Cromley, and Kaplan (2014) conducted a study of 363 undergraduate STEM students enrolled in a course to examine identity development

and beliefs to predict what students intended to leave the STEM program. Identity development involving exploration, such as information seeking and reflection, was positively correlated with competence for and value of the major (Perez, Cromley & Kaplan, 2014). Additionally, researchers have found that overall students with certain personality types are more likely to choose some majors over others. For example, students who are more social and involved were more likely to major in social sciences or education (Porter & Umbach, 2006). Porter & Umbach concluded that personality scales were strong predictors of major choice, even more so than academic preparation, family influence and academic self-efficacy (2006, p. 444). This research touches upon social sciences, but most literature aims to discover why students aren't choosing STEM majors instead of why students do choose social sciences.

Although research has directly explored students choosing majors like STEM, there is almost no research that has considered a choice of major in the humanities and social sciences. The conversation about major difference includes Craig Calhoun, a member of the Social Science Research Council, speaking about how the communication field can and should be “transformative for the social sciences” for students (2011, p. 1480). Communication in higher education combines several social sciences, such as rhetoric, media, journalism, literature, history, and sociology, to create an interdisciplinary subject (Calhoun, 2011). This overlap of disciplines lends a sense of ambiguity and curiosity to students' academic identity.

This discussion is significant because the communication major has become increasingly popular in recent years at colleges and universities. According to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences Humanities Indicator, the communication discipline is increasing in growth in relation to the quantity of undergraduate majors and degrees, major popularity and the amount of institutions offering a communication program (Schmitt, 2014). Many attribute this popularity to

the discipline aligning well with social networking, media creation and the digital economy (Schmitt, 2014). Focus on curriculum planning around the communication major has sparked debate on what universities should require their students to study to develop an ideal communication program and department. Bertelson and Goodboy (2009) concluded that communication theory, interpersonal communication, organizational communication, group interaction and intercultural communication are basic areas every student should experience during their studies for the sake of personal and professional success (p. 264-264). The Princeton Review cites the communication major as the second best college major based on their research on job prospects, popularity and alumni salaries (Franek, n.d.). The growing popularity of the communication major makes it important to investigate the identities of communication students at the university.

Carpenter and McEwan (2013) investigated why undergraduate students chose communication by focusing on students' individual characteristics and motives. They discovered that math anxiety and the perceived easiness of the major were influencing factors in selecting communication as a major (Carpenter & McEwan, 2013). When predicting the likelihood of a student choosing communication, benefits from courses and job prospects emerged as significant predictors. Furthermore, researchers acknowledge communication as a "discovery" major that students switch into once they have started college (Carpenter & McEwan, 2013). The communication major becoming known as a discovery major comes from coverage of a multitude of different areas and material applying to a variety of fields post-graduation. The communication major does not lead to one, linear career path (Calhoun, 2011).

The popularity of communication as a major (Carpenter & McEwan, 2013) and its potential usefulness (Franek, n.d.) suggest that it should be a field that students are feel proud to

major in. However, the newness of the field and its interdisciplinary nature can also pose a challenge for students as they try to make sense of their academic identity and its value in society. This problem is partly reflected in societal discourses around communication as a process.

Contradictory Discourses about Communication

In this section, I elaborate on the observation that there is cultural discourse around the value of communication itself and the lack of value assigned to studying communication in higher education. As I will explain below, the contradictory discourse focuses on how communication is a vital skill to human competency, yet the major is not highlighted as such. This inconsistency causes contradictory discourse around communication as in certain contexts it is stressed as incredibly important, while in others, it is undervalued and criticized.

Deborah Cameron opens up her chapter entitled “Communication and the Pursuit of Happiness” with the results of British Telecom’s 1995 forum, which aim was to learn more about human communication. The results included “good communicators lead happier lives”, “making an effort to communicate is the key to happy relationships”, “the best way to resolve a disagreement is to get them talking” and “many arguments would be resolved if people communicate better” (Cameron, 2000, p.149). This is emphasized at career development courses, relationship counseling and team building exercises across space and time. The Fortune 500, a top ranking list of the largest U.S. corporations by *Fortune Magazine*, names communication as the top key, but neglected, skills for success (*Fortune Magazine*, 2013). This is a primary example of the general public placing the skill and concept of communication on a high pedestal. Communication is believed to be as crucial for all types of relationships and interactions (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981). While discussing the value of communication studies, researchers argue,

"[h]umans are born with the ability to vocalize; but not with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that define communication competence" (Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000). Arguably, communication education then becomes a crucial area of study. When faculty members across a variety of academic disciplines and institutions were surveyed about basic competencies every college graduate should have, the unanimous answer was "skills in communicating (writing, speaking, reading and listening)" (Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000).

Society emphasizes communication as a key aspect of success, yet interestingly enough, the major is not stressed as a desirable course of study for students attending university (Carpenter & McEwan, 2013). The National Communication Association and universities alike are trying to change society's hesitancy to consider communication an important area of study by pointing to the development of the whole person, success in career and the improvement of education. Researchers argue that communicating competently is essential to success and is a process that has to be learned and, therefore, should be seen as a central focus of college education (Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000).

Universities, researchers and the National Communication Association are all working to solidify communication's place as a respected major. The popular media has created the perception of communication as the "bullshit" major and this could impact how students perceive themselves as learners. This includes several blog posts and online sites declaring, "A degree in communications is perhaps the worst because they are majoring in the art of BS" (College Crunch, 2008) and "For the life of me, I just can't fathom why anyone still chooses this major. I mean as a high school kid (we're talking 15-20 years ago), I remember the Communications degree being a constant source of jokes—right there with basket weaving... These jokes have carried on to this day. Who majors in a joke major?" (Darwin, 2011). This type

of negative discourse contributes to the confusion about the value assigned to communication. Carpenter and McEwan concluded that students' intellectual curiosity is the ultimate driver to major in communication even in the midst of negative portrayals and stereotypes (2013). This contradiction is important because an individual identity is only meaningful when put into the context of the social world (Watson, 2008), which today involves contradicting beliefs of the importance of communication. Societal contradictory discourse presents students with a unique opportunity to present either a confident or unsure identity to their fellow classmates, professors, family and society.

What Impact Does This Have on Identity?

Students participate in identity talk to communicate their academic and personal identity. Through this identity talk, students reveal experiences and expressions of who they are as a person and student. The inconsistencies I was expecting to see in the data included self-doubt, how students are not valued in the academic environment and how they navigate their personal and academic place. A question I had begun pursuing was: how do communication students navigate the inconsistencies behind the communication major and, then, communicate that to others? Prior research has not considered how communication majors interpret and talk about their identities as communication students within universities. There is information on students entering the major, but it would be significant to know how students who have been immersed in the major for a longer period of time communicate their identities related to the major. This study will help close the gap in understanding how upperclassmen are making sense of their role in the study of communication and society.

Students are key in the social construction of how the communication major is perceived in society. An analysis of how students' sense of self was impacted by their communication

major will reveal how students play a role in shaping how the communication major is seen. The combination of the student's development through college, identity and the communication major creates a new setting for investigating how students interpret and speak about their identities. This research will be important for current and future students, educators and employers as it provides insight into how students think about and communicate their identities. The aim here is not to talk about the contradictory discourse in society itself, but to focus on how students navigate and interpret their own role in the on-going communication conversation within and outside the university setting. Identity work (Holmegaard, Madsen & Ulriksen, 2014) acts as a theoretical framework to focus on the narratives, accounts and explanations students' provided during interviews and in exit surveys. The purpose of this project is to explore the accounts communication majors offer of their academic experiences to negotiate their own identity.

RQ1: How do students perform and report identity work of their communication major to negotiate their personal and academic identities?

RQ2: How, if at all, do competing discourses of the value of communication itself and of studying communication shape such accounts?

Respondent interviews with communication majors will reveal how students explain their academic identity, namely, through identity work. This includes key phrases and stories that can be coined as identity talk on both a personal and academic level. Answers to the research questions will reveal how students form narratives to describe their identity as a learner and communicate their academic and personal identities to others. The first question focuses on how students communicate their experiences through identity talk to negotiate their identity in an

ambiguous field. The second question focuses on if, and how, competing discourses shape identity accounts.

Since there is a lack of literature on the communication major's identity development and maintenance, I hope to fill the gap to add to an overall academic and social science involved conversation. Chapter two will explain the methods of data collection with the secondary data, the interviews, and the data analysis.

Chapter 2: Methods

In this chapter, I will explain how data was collected from both exit surveys and, more thoroughly, through interviews. The procedures and participants are discussed to provide detail into who took part in the study. Finally, an overview of analysis will set up the findings and discussion chapters.

Data collection

The project's purpose is to explore the accounts communication majors offer of their academic experiences to negotiate their personal and academic identities. To investigate communication student's academic and professional identities, a qualitative approach was used to examine the communication identity. The two sources of data collection were exit surveys and semi-structured, in depth interviews.

Exit surveys. The university encourages students to complete a major based survey upon their graduation. The surveys were an accessible pool of data obtained through a bureaucratic process from the Office of Planning, Budget and Analysis at the university. The survey provided a context to the research by focusing on if the student's educational goal was met, suggestions for changes in the communication department and the best aspect of the major. Document analysis guided the formation of the project's research questions by identifying what the exit surveys did not critically examine, which includes insight into how students navigate negative discourse by identity regulation. Document analysis is most often used to compliment other research methods (i.e. the interviews). The secondary data was used as a means of triangulation to validate and link two separate sets of data on the communication major at the research site (Bowen, 2009). Seventy-two graduating communication students completed the surveys. This secondary set of data builds the credibility of the study as information was obtained without the

researcher's intervention or knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Although the surveys were not the product of the researcher's intervention, document analysis is not transparent information because of the circumstances of the document (i.e. who created it, motive in creating it, etc.). I used survey data in this project to set the stage for my study, and to complement the analysis of the primary interview data. Although these data were a helpful starting point to explore how communication majors see themselves within the department, they did not provide a full picture of academic and personal identity. The university administrated exit surveys served as a research starting point confirming that further data collection on the communication major identity was necessary. Then, after analyzing interviews, I searched the secondary data for themes identified in the analysis of the interview data, including the themes identified and key terms, in order to triangulate my findings. This secondary body of data confirmed that the interview responses were not simply an outcome of the social situation in the interview.

Interviews. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient for the participant over a period of three months. The respondent interview was an ideal method since it allows the participants to explain their reasoning behind their major choice and how they convey that to others (i.e. to the principal investigator). The interview itself creates a social interaction impacting how participants perform and report identity work. The researcher began by contacting communication majors in her own social network. A recruitment flyer was sent out to other individual's within the researcher's social network to spread the word about the study. The recruitment flyer included a description of the study, the researcher's information and the necessary criteria to participate. The snowball sampling method was then used to encourage participants to recommend potential participants in their own networks.

The participants who took part in the interview portion of the study included twelve communication major students at a large southwest research university. There were eight female participants and four male participants. Each participant had been a communication major for at least one year within the prestigious communication department. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 30 years old. The age group included reflects the critical emerging adulthood period of identity development. The socioeconomic participant level was middle to upper class with access to higher education. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their personal and academic identity and privacy. Age and gender were collected and used with the participant's consent. The table below provides participant information, including age, gender, declaration and graduation date.

Table 1: Participant Information

Name	Age & Gender	Declared Comm.	Graduation
Molly	21/F	Freshman-2 nd semester	Spring 2016
Patrice	20/F	Freshman-2 nd semester	Spring 2017
Andrew	20/M	Freshman- 1 st semester	Spring 2017
Jessica	21/F	Freshman-1 st semester	Spring 2016
Cate	23/F	Transferred to CU	Spring 2016
Nate	22/M	Freshman- 2 nd semester	Spring 2016
Callie	21/F	Sophomore- 1 st semester	Spring 2016
John	21/M	Freshman- 1 st semester	Spring 2016
Alayna	22/F	Junior- 1 st semester	Summer 2017
Matthew	30/M	1 st semester at CU	Fall 2017
Darcy	20/F	Junior- 1 st semester	Spring 2017

Emma	21/F	Sophomore- 2 nd semester	Spring 2016
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Procedures

All research procedures went through a thorough review by the university's Institutional Review Board for human research. Written consent was obtained before each interview took place to ensure participants were informed about the nature of the study. In addition to written consent, verbal consent was requested for permission to audio record the interview for future transcribing and notes. Participants were reminded that they could skip any question, request the audio recording to be stopped, or leave the study completely at any time throughout the interview. Possible risks to participants were very minimal and included possible discomfort with disclosing personal and academic identity information linked to college major. The interviews ranged from fifteen to forty minutes in length depending on how much the participant was willing to disclose.

The interview questions explored how a student chose their major, the value they assign communication and future career paths. The participant information document and interview guide used are included in the Appendix. Participants were given the opportunity to discuss any topic that they felt was not covered in the interview guide at the conclusion of the interview. Participants chose to talk about why they are happy at the university, why they chose communication and how the interview allowed them to further appreciate the major. Each interview was transcribed at the utterance level to enable coding for the identification of patterns and similarities across the participants' experiences. The audio and interview transcripts were kept on the principal investigator's password-protected computer to ensure participant privacy.

The principal investigator was the sole person with access to the password and the laptop computer.

Analysis

For data analysis, the collection of relevant data was analyzed through systematic thematic coding using conceptual categories from the research questions. My analysis was motivated by, and organized around, the concept of identity talk. The repetition scrutiny technique was used to discover a wide range of themes and subthemes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The researcher went through the interview transcripts by cutting and sorting significant quotes and expressions into broad categories (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Both identity work performance and identity work reporting were identified and categorized. *Identity performance* occurred when students presented their identity during the interview with the researcher. *Identity reporting* included participant's reports of explanations and responses to third parties outside the interview setting. Since this was an exploratory step in the data analysis, as many themes as possible were generated. The themes included how students reported and performed major perceptions and stereotypes, drastic interpersonal impact, distancing from the presumption of the communication major, newfound self-reliance, professional confidence, procedures for dealing with criticism, and disappointment in others. By identifying recurring regularities in the text, the researcher was able to combine concepts and patterns into main themes. The main themes included: positioning the communication identity, communication major pride and personal growth through better communication. The analysis then used the background literature on identity, the communication field and contradictory discourse around communication to create an accurate picture of what it means to be a communication major at a large university.

Chapter 3: Findings

Repetition thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns in the interview data linked to identity work established in chapter one. The overarching themes and subthemes included the following:

- Positioning the Communication Identity (Identity talk reporting)
 - *Subtheme 1: "I immediately follow it up"*
 - *Subtheme 2: "I was just very talkative in high school"*
- *Pride Shines Through Negative Discourse* (A mix of Identity talk performance and reporting)
 - *Subtheme 1: "I'm part of a group of the ideal people"*
 - *Subtheme 2: "What job do you think I can't get?"*
- Personal Growth through Better Communication (Identity talk performance)
 - *Subtheme 1: "I'm more understanding now, not linear single minded"*
 - *Subtheme 2: "You can articulate and actually say intelligent things"*
 - *Subtheme 3: "Let's sit down and talk about it like adults"*

The findings chapter lays out each theme to address the research question investigating how students perform and report identity talk to create their academic and personal identities. Each overarching theme and subtheme had elements of students reporting and performing their academic and personal identity through identity work. The findings set up a discussion of how contradictory discourse influences identity presentation. Quotes and examples are discussed below to display how communication majors use identity talk to communicate their academic and personal identities.

Theme 1: Positioning the Communication Identity

Many students articulated that they were not only a communication student but were also supplementing their communication studies with outside experiences during their time at the university. This act symbolizes how students' perceived both their academic and personal identities in the context of their major. Participants explicitly reported identity work by communicating how outside experiences complimented and lent credibility to their communication education. These outside experiences were used to position the communication major. Seven of the twelve participants reported that they had invoked experiences outside of the major in the presentation of their identities to third parties. The supplemental experiences included a variety of academic and non-academic experiences ranging from certificates, an additional major, an outside passion or job. Students emphasized how these experiences gave more meaning to the communication major and vice versa. Positioning the communication identity was broken up into subthemes, as there were main ways students used supplemental experiences to talk about their communication major. The first was to validate their communication study to others and the second was to narrow down the broad discipline of communication with a more personal connection.

Subtheme 1: "I immediately follow it up". The validation strategy involved participants reporting structured identity talk to others when they spoke about their communication major. Citing extracurricular majors, minors and experiences served as a validation strategy. Why do communication majors feel the need to validate their academic major identity with supplemental experiences? The data revealed the strong presence of negative feedback from fellow students at the university. Several participants shared insight into how and why they felt the need to prove themselves. Molly expressed her main frustration in being a communication major saying, "I would definitely go back to the stigma that people have... you do kind of have to prove for

yourself. Yeah, I am a comm major, but here are my qualities and here's what I can do and here's what I learned from this major... but here's what I am outside of that" (Molly, 01/28/2016). This report of identity talk emphasized the importance of defending the major and acknowledging "what she is outside of that". When asked about how others valued the communication education, a male participant explained how communication is often framed.

I think we get shit on. Um, you don't really get that level of respect... People assume because it's not technical in any way because you're not learning about engineering or economics or something that old white men can apply to success in America, then it's not worth it... And it wasn't until this year that I was able to counter those claims and explain to people why no that's not true, I'm going to get a lot of value to wherever I go because of my communication major. (Nate, 02/18/2016)

When asked about the worst part of the communication major, he expressed his annoyance with people not taking it seriously.

Um I would really say the worst part is having to deal with the criticism. Not as much, I think mostly it's students because you know a lot of students all came into college at the same time as us or around the same time and knew the stigma about something like a communication major and so going through that succeeding as a communication major it's not impressive to certain people, which is a shame because it should be. A lot of people don't know enough about it and I think that's the part that's most disappointing. (Nate, 02/18/2016)

The presence of negative discourse around the communication major described here presents a challenge for students as they develop and communicate various identities. Students must then strategically formulate their self-concept with the help of additional training to justify their choice to major in communication. The accounts of the validation strategy did not reveal a lack of pride in the major, even in the midst of criticism and critiques from students of other majors. Emma revealed the most challenging part of the major was, "People's view of it and how it is not respecting. I feel like I am always trying to prove to others that my major should be valued" (Emma, 03/08/2016). This ever-present

need to prove the value of the communication major reflects how participants make sense of this challenge and, thus, engage in identity talk with others.

One male student spoke about why he ties in his business minor with the communication major when speaking with people to confirm his credibility.

I usually say communication and business. I factor in business because we are in that early transition period where.. hopefully people will eventually respect communication but until then obviously you have to talk yourself up and then you can build the credibility after that... It's not until that next conversation where you can prove how beneficial communication was to you. (Nate, 02/18/2016)

This statement was an explicit example of identity talk to others. It explained how he positions his business education experience to make the communication major a more respected area of study. The student felt the need to combine his academic experiences to legitimize his communication degree. In this example, a minor program was used to validate his communication major and gain respect for himself, to allow him the chance to prove the importance of his communication degree in future conversations. This created a communicative dilemma for participants who must choose between defending their major and positioning it in a strategic way.

Patrice, a twenty-year-old female student, chose to respond to peers and family when asked about her major by positioning it with her supplemental certificate. She reported, "It's kind of like a joke, you're taking the easy way out type thing. And I found, too, I tell people that I'm communication, but I immediately follow it up with I'm getting my teaching degree" (02/01/2016). When prompted to explain more, Patrice clarified that when she explains to others that communication will help her students and create a successful classroom atmosphere, people are less judgmental. Similar to Nate's tactics with his minor, Patrice used her teaching certificate to validate why she chose communication and how it will positively shape her future in the

academic world. The term “immediately” acknowledged the participant’s need to cut off any negative reaction before it occurred. Document analysis from student exit surveys also revealed students emphasizing supplemental experiences. For example, one student talked about how their communication degree will be useful saying, “I am getting a teaching certificate and take (sic) communication classes will help in the classroom”. Similar to Patrice’s explanation, the teaching certificate seemed to be the main priority with a focus on creating a better classroom environment through communication courses.

In another example, Jessica supplemented her communication degree with advertising and explained how she has responded to critiques.

But I think as the years have gone on I’ve been able to, I don’t want to say like get defensive, because that sounds like negative, but be able to kind of like defend it and be like well especially with advertising, like well it fits into my strategic side of advertising and it’s going to be really helpful and stuff like that. So I’m able to just kind of stand up for myself. I’m willing to agree that yes some people in the comm major are just in the comm major. So I can be like that’s some people, but I’m taking it this direction. (Jessica, 02/09/2016)

This need for acceptance and validation from others demonstrated how the contradictory discourse around the importance of communication impacts student’s identities and how they communicate those identities. Jessica explicitly said how she is able to “stand up for herself” and explained how she performs identity talk to others through explanation of her advertising major and intended direction. She reported identity talk to satisfy others need for an explanation more than her own. The validation strategy was used as a justification and explanation of why participants chose to study communication. Students’ tendency to position themselves was interesting because they are manipulating the way they talk and perform their identity due to contradictory discourse.

Subtheme 2: "I was just very talkative in high school". On the other hand, students expressed how outside experiences made the major more applicable and relevant to their everyday lives, whether through a passion, job or personality trait. This way of speaking created a more personal connection to the major that students used in their identity talk. In contrast to the validation strategy, participants performed identity talk to the researcher regarding how they enhanced the major with a more personal connection. Students felt that having a focus was important to be a successful communication student. For example, Alayna explained how when she transferred from another college, she also changed majors saying, "And I was a music business major so I tied in music and being a musician to communication like that's how I communicate with people..." (02/24/2016). Alayna used her passion for music to make sense of why she chose to major in communication. She detailed how she used music as a lens to focus in on her communication through music. Nate, who had started his own company as a junior in high school, described how he used his company in addition to his communication major to establish a more meaningful link to his studies at the university. John and Cate spoke about how their personality traits created a personal connection to the major and supplemented their degree. John reported, "Um, I was actually recommended to take the path of communication major because I was just very talkative in high school and numerous people said I should do something with because I just like to talk a lot." (02/18/2016). Later in the interview, he cited his personality as the reason he thrives in the communication department. Cate echoed that her personality drove her success in the major by saying, "I've always been very extraverted and outgoing" (02/01/16). These examples demonstrated how their personality type made it permissible and beneficial to major in communication.

Another student became interested in Political Science and encouraged other students to pick up a minor. She connected with another discipline and expressed how her passions strengthened the communication major.

Um, I would tell them to get a minor in anything that they're interested in because I feel like having my poly sci background has helped me appreciate comm more because a lot of people can be very narrow minded and one sided on arguments and they don't really especially in poly sci they have very high tensions and not being able to see people's point of view, so I'd say that. (Callie, 02/17/2016)

Callie performed identity work by actively conveying how her interest has strategically positioned her experience of the communication major. She strengthened her academic self by announcing that the political science minor had made her more open and thoughtful in her arguments. Several participants stressed the importance of having an additional field of study. Other participants expressed regret over not pursuing something additional to narrow down the communication discipline. Cate articulated her frustration with only pursuing the communication major.

It's kind of hard to be like I don't know where I want to focus it would have been cool to learn more about certificate programs to go along with being a comm major like I think there is a public relations certificate and if I had known about that I definitely would have done that...yeah I would try and find something to supplement just communication, like the business minor or ya know there's a couple other certificate programs that are really cool especially now with the whole college. (Cate, 02/01/2016)

Cate's explanation was an act of identity performance as she justifies to the researcher why she did not have an additional certificate or minor. This statement acted to defend her lack of framing the major strategically. Alayna expressed that the worst part about being a communication major was her lack of supplemental experience saying, "I don't have a minor, so it's very broad like I'm a communication major so it's probably not going to look that great compared to someone who's an EBIO major with a minor in blah blah blah" (02/24/2016). Cate

and Alayna narrated they had made a mistake by not narrowing down communication to a specific avenue. John clarified that communication was most useful when a student “learns other things other than just communicating” (02/18/2016). After reflection, participants presented that their communication education does have or would have more value if supplemented with outside experiences. The theme of positioning the communication major included not only explanations of academic and personal identity but also justification for choosing to study communication.

Theme 2: Pride Shines Through Negative Discourse

Interestingly enough, after students described the environment of negative discourse and feeling the need to position themselves as communication majors, participants reported and performed pride in their major. A strong sense of pride in the communication major was expressed in almost every interview. Students were eager to confront stereotypes about the communication major and talk about why it was a perfect fit for their academic study. In doing so, students participated in and reported identity talk demonstrating that they were proud of being communication majors. In addition, participants proudly performed identity talk to communicate who they were *within* and *outside* the communication population. Although participants directly acknowledged the negative discourse from peers at the university both in and outside the major, the majority took time to address their satisfaction with being a communication student. Their pride for the major demonstrated how the major has built confidence in a variety of areas, including within the major, in the professional world, and personal life. This theme surfaced consistently in the data providing substantial examples of pride and confidence. Expressions of pride surfaced as an intersection between academic identity work and personal identity work by shifting their academic experience into a sense of self.

Subtheme 1: "I'm part of a group of the ideal people". Participants expressed pride not only in the communication major itself, but also being a successful student in communication through identity talk. Andrew shyly explained his position in the communication major by saying, "Um. I'm... I don't want to sound like full of myself, but I feel like I'm part of a group of the ideal people who CU is looking for in the communication major. I feel like um I just take it very seriously and I'm really proud of it" (02/12/2016). This was an explicit example of conveying that he sees himself as an "ideal" student and is "proud" (02/12/2016). Nate echoed this pride in being a successful communication major sharing, "Um I'd say within the communication major, I am trying to think of the word. Like, I can't think of the word for it but a solid like a successful representation of the major, like I could almost be a spokesperson for the major" (02/18/2016). Again, Molly verbally expressed her pride by saying, "I'm totally proud to be a comm major. No I love comm and I advocate for comm. I just think that some people are like oh that's the easiest major you can take..." (01/28/2016). These expressions surfaced again and again confirming that the communication major is valued and well represented by a portion of students.

Participants were proud to distance themselves from the presumption of the typical communication major by performing identity talk during the interview. The researcher approached the topic of the participant's peers by asking how their fellow communication majors valued the major. Most participants responded by explaining the communication student dichotomy that exists within the communication student population: the "good" communication students and the "bad" communication students. They would categorize themselves in one category and put others on the opposite side of the spectrum. This specific identity talk distanced participants from the negative perceptions and presumptions of the communication major. The

talk does not imply a lack of pride in the major, but on the contrary, pride to the extent that they want to be correctly represented.

One participant had a lot to say about the split between communication majors and her frustration in students who do not take their education seriously.

There are people in this major that that are looking to go places in life where this is their life and I mean this is also your life so but they're looking to take this further and this is serious to them. And so I think that just to kind of have more respect for the major and other people that are in the major and also just in the... Cuz you're not just letting yourself down, you are kind of letting the major down and other people in the major which is unfortunate. (Molly, 01/28/2016)

Although this student did not directly say where she is on the student spectrum, she alludes to it by creating an "other" and urging students to stop letting the major down. This student was offended that communication majors were giving the whole major a negative representation. Phrases such as "hit or miss" and "50/50" were used to describe the communication population as a whole. Matthew explained that the worst part of the communication major was the "others", saying, "I think... that other 50% that are just kind of they just kind of sit there, that's kind of distracting. Cuz there's a lot of group projects and say you're in one of your classes now I'm the one that wants to do well and everyone else is like roll the dice" (02/29/2016). The participant clearly said his place in the situation (wanting to do well) and everyone else's (roll the dice). Identity talk was performed when participants clarified how "other students" did not take the major seriously to emphasize how they were different.

Um, I would say there are people like me... who are totally valuing this education and they're in comm for a reason and they love it and I think there are also kids they don't really care. And so it's hard being in classes being like I'm that student that cares that really wants to get the grade whereas here's this student who's like hm I'm at school because my parents are making me I don't love comm blah blah and then you get stuck with them. (Molly, 01/28/2016)

This distinction between "people like me" and others was an intentional move for participants to say that this negative could be true for some people, but that does not apply to

them, while talking to others. Several participants, such as John and Jessica, alluded to the fact that they were serious communication students because of their future. John performed identity talk by saying “like myself with firefighting” to identify himself as a “good” communication student.

Um, so so. I think there's a lot of people that say it's a joke, while other people really take it pretty seriously, especially for their future. If it's going to be something, like myself with firefighting, if it's going to be useful I think it's very valuable. (John, 02/18/2016)

These communication students made sense of their academic identity in opposition to others in the communication department. In doing so they created distance between themselves and negative stereotypes about the major. Participants were able to maintain their pride throughout contradictory discourse around the value of the communication major.

Subtheme 2: “What job do you think I can't get?”. Many participants stressed the importance of the communication major in their job search and future careers. Although the data revealed that non-communication major students perceived the communication major negatively, there was a shift when the interview narrowed in on employers and the outside world. Participants expressed a sense of sureness in their ability to get a job and “beat out” students of other majors. Nate was a strong advocate for entering the job market with confidence when asked about responding to inquiries about future jobs saying, “Um, I haven't been asked that in a while but at this point I'd be saying what job do you think I can't get? Because seriously, there's no job that this doesn't apply to... I can somehow be related to any position there is in the world because of this major” (02/18/2016). A female participant clarified that she chose to major in communication because it offered “an upper hand” in professional settings.

I mean, honestly, looking for jobs it is a huge um aspect of like being able to communicate with people in the office space and a lot of people now don't know how to do that especially with technology... I have an upper hand on because if you can't do an

interview and you can't be relatable no one is going to want to hire you even if you're really good at your job. (Alayna, 02/24/2016)

Participants asserted that the communication major's broad intellectual focus allowed them to be flexible and adaptable candidates for the workforce. Callie chimed in by saying, "I feel like to them we seem like very flexible people that can kind of fit into any type of job position or any type of pocket. And that's not a bad, I don't think that's a bad thing, it's not like I only know how to do this, it's like sure put me here, put me here. We're kind of go with the flow, very adaptable to different situations" (Callie, 02/17/2016). Callie beamed with confidence as she spoke about her ability to fit anywhere within the professional world.

This ability to fit anywhere resonated with several participants. Cate explained how her communication major has helped with internship and professional opportunities.

My first one was event planning and a lot of event planning is like um public relations and communications combined and so because I was a comm major they were like we can teach you how to do this... I kinda tell people this is what I want to do and this is the degree I need to get there and I've learned stuff that I wouldn't have otherwise. (Cate, 02/01/2016)

Cate reported identity talk by using her internship and flexibility as examples of her many capabilities. She firmly stated, "this is what I want to do" in a professional sense and used her pride to shut down negative attention from others. Another female participant explained that she has the freedom to go any direction and that freedom brings confidence. When asked about her response when people critically question what jobs communication students can obtain, she responds with conviction.

I could have worked in a corporate business office or I could have been a recruiter and all these different things and it's like comm is kinda because you can communicate with people and be able to articulate and have conversations and just feel comfortable doing this definitely just helps with the networking and connecting and everything. So I think usually I say with comm you can go anywhere you want. Also if I lose my job I probably it's not going to be that horrible because I can be like what do I want to do next? I have a fucking clout to do anything. (Molly, 01/28/2016)

Participants also exhibited pride when mentioning how they felt in comparison to their STEM counterparts at the university. Later in the interview, Callie spoke directly about her perceived differences of STEM students and communication students while still communicating pride in her communication identity.

I just don't think they understand, I feel like if we were numbers people we would look down on comm majors; And people people we're like you are numbers people you don't know how to relate to anybody else like I know that a lot of times when I look at basically nerds and I'm like you're awkward you can't carry a conversation. I'm like I'm going to do so much better in the real world than you are because you can't even hold a small conversation (Callie, 02/17/2016)

This was significant as it spoke to the students' personal identities extending beyond the classroom setting. As Callie pointed out, her communication degree has provided her with the ability to carry a conversation and, she believes, that the social experience will help her go further. Even if their academic identity has not been taken seriously within the university setting, communication students present themselves differently when moving onto professional roles and talk (i.e. interviews, the job search). Cate specifically referenced STEM majors when talking about her major with confidence saying, "and I don't remember what class this was but one of my professors was like 'the STEM majors and like programs are kinda not like dying out', but people want to hire people that know how to communicate. Like statistically I think that's something that a lot of companies are looking for now and we have an advantage on that which is kind of cool" (Cate, 02/01/2016). The participants performed identity work in the interview to communicate that although their skills are not technical, they have become superior in today's professional world. Nate also used the STEM or more technical majors to explain why his communication major should be seen as superior in certain situations.

A lot of times I'll talk with people that study more technical majors. They're not articulate, uh they have no understanding of another side of an argument, they're just

very one dimensional. And the comm major, studying comm and rhetoric, I think you understand you can put yourself into a situation that you're not really in to understand it. We are able to understand everything. (Nate, 02/18/2016)

Multiple participants brought up the contrast between communication and STEM majors to highlight where they thrived and others do not. Matthew described how his peers in the engineering school poke fun at him for being a communication major, yet he finds pride in the fact that he is "not robotic". He explained, "But you know they're always like we're a type A, level 1 major or something, yeah, and then their degree is hard, they have all this math and I'm like I don't have to do any math for my degree. But I also tell them you know you're more robotic than I would be and stuff like that" (Matthew, 02/29/16). These statements were worthwhile to examine because participants place STEM major students into a devalued category with reference to personal success in certain contexts. Explicit expressions, such as "they're one dimensional", "you're awkward" and "you're more robotic", were examples of proud identity talk that claim to be the opposite of those allegations. The participants stated that they were multi-dimensional, not awkward and more personable in comparison to their peers. This pride was expressed through identity talk specifically by declarations of competence and the ability to succeed in the professional world. Although negative discourse dictates participants' academic life, their pride in what they have learned and who they have become prevailed. Participants made claims about how the communication major gave them a sense of uniqueness and superior abilities throughout a variety of contexts.

Theme 3: Personal Growth Through Better Communication

In regards to personal identity, participants expressed how the communication major facilitated personal growth that shaped them outside of the workplace and classroom. Participants were able to reflect on their time in the major, whether that be one year or four

years, to identify how they have grown both as an individual and by improving interpersonal relationships skills. Students often referenced interpersonal communication classes during this period of the interview emphasizing how growth came from actual interaction and understanding of others. As the literature suggested, personal development is an individual's concept of who they are and a social environment, such as an interpersonal communication course, develops this self-concept (Watson, 2008; Weidman et al., 2014). Personal growth expressions were a result of participants both performing identity work to the researcher and reporting on identity work. There were a variety of measures to determine what is personal growth and my focus narrows in on participants' emphasis on how and where they have grown.

Subtheme 1: "I'm more understanding now, not linear single minded". Students described how the communication major had provided them with critical thinking skills to develop a more sophisticated worldview. Quotes drawn from interviews show how participants were performing identity talk and lead into a discussion of why they structured their talk in that way. One participant explained how the communication major had transformed his personal identity in the last two and a half years at the university.

Well, basically I've just noticed when I'm back home in LA, I just view things so much differently and I don't think it's just being away from home. It's just learning um how people communicate with each other and what messages mean so I just think I kind of like I don't know I have a different outlook on the world ... I think my listening skills have improved a lot, my communication skills have improved a lot, my self confidence especially when I took public speaking I took that my very first semester at CU and I was like very shy in high school kind of more reserved and that really helped me talk to people I don't know and stuff like that. (Andrew, 02/12/2016)

Key identity talk phrases showed how Andrew's personal identity was shaped specifically by the communication major, not simply the university as a whole. The development of a "different outlook on the world" away from his hometown can be interpreted as he has reached a higher level of maturity. Similar to Andrew, participants voiced they had developed a

sense of understanding and compassion. A female participant shared how she had grown by learning how to acknowledge and deal with differences, "I'd say, I'm more tolerant especially with dealing with people I feel frustrating because of their personalities and maybe holding back or culture differences, I'm a lot more tolerant instead of being like you don't accustom to the way I'm used to..." (Callie, 02/17/2016). Additionally, John reflected that he has become a more open person since communication courses opened his mind to other people and perspectives. He specifically talked about the focus on gender differences making him more aware and sympathetic to others. The exposure to different kinds of communication, cultures and perspectives gave students the opportunity to think in new ways. This matters because it is a unique aspect of the communication major, compared to other areas of study. The communication department offers classes in intercultural communication and gender studies, among countless others, to examine taken for granted phenomenon. Emma explained how communication shaped her world.

Uh, I am very self aware and this major has put me in tune with my emotions and perceptions of others. I try to be open to like literally everything and everyone because this major has taught me to accept society and everything within it. It has made me very self aware, much more than others. I recognize who I want to be and how I want others to see me. My friends just accept certain things about themselves like being bossy for example. I don't just accept things I try to better myself" (Emma, 03/08/2016).

The way participants consistently pointed to how their education, more so than other majors according to students, had influenced their talk of acceptance and critical thinking is noteworthy. Cate said that her favorite thing about the major was, "learning how to think critically really changed my perception of the world and I think that's really cool and also think that because of that I can participate in intelligent conversations" (02/01/2016). This claim that critical thinking was the crucial element to participation in intelligent conversations showed personal growth at an intellectual level. Additionally, students in the university exit surveys also

explicitly commented on the major's ability to allow sophisticated thinking. One survey response was an example of identity talk performance that read,

I think they do a remarkable job at teaching students how to analyze the world more critically. Critical thinking and critique are applied to texts, movements, language, people, how we talk about people, media, etc. It has been very rewarding for me in that way. I feel like I am a more aware and enlightened consumer, friend, colleague, student... the list goes on.

When Nate was asked about the overall value of the communication degree, he was quick to respond, "Now that we're getting into more specialized classes when you learn specifically about something like argument or something um I'm able to understand and I'm basically able to understand anything about the world a lot better now" (02/18/2016). These expressions of self-growth demonstrated how the academic identity has helped to form a superior personal identity explicitly pointing to the convergence between the two identity levels. Another student responded in the exit surveys that, "The most important thing I learned from my program was critical thinking. I strongly believe this sets me apart as a job candidate." The claim that critical thinking sets this respondent apart as a job candidate demonstrates how a developed skill from the major has contributed to personal growth. This is another example of the strong ties between academic and personal identity.

Another participant, Jessica, explained that the communication major "helped me be very well rounded in any situation, ya know... You can kind of see different perspectives. So well rounded, yeah" (Jessica, 02/09/2016). Becoming a well-rounded person was achieved through the communication classes and professors, according to Jessica, because in the past she only excelled at certain skills and behaviors. Darcy expressed that the communication major has shaped her outside of academics and the workplace by saying, "I feel like I'm more understanding now, not linear single minded, but having like experiences with groups a lot of the

time and kind of simulating environments that I can place myself in other people's shoes. Which I feel like will help me in other realms" (Darcy, 03/02/2016). The communication major provided students with an outlet to develop a different outlook and perspective on their surroundings which has influenced their personal identity development.

Interview examples demonstrate that personal growth has occurred specifically through the communication major and education. It was useful to see how claims of personal growth are supported by the secondary data of university exit surveys. As stated previously, the 2012 student exit surveys created triangulation of data through document analysis to compare and contrast major themes. Out of the representative students who completed the surveys, 98.6% of communication students identified that they were satisfied (completely or somewhat satisfied) with their communication education at the university (Exit Surveys, 2012). Satisfaction is often a result of personal growth and development creating a positive correlation between data.

Subtheme 2: "You can articulate and actually say intelligent things". Students claimed that the communication major caused them to become more articulate and, as a result, it served as a measurement of growth. The term "articulate" continuously surfaced in the data across speakers when participants were presenting identity work directly to the researcher. Many students believed they had grown by becoming more articulate through the communication major. Nate explained that, "I've always been comfortable talking to people, which is huge. But there's no way in hell I'd be as *articulate* as I am without the communication major. And there's no way I could think as fast on my feet or somehow twist a negative into a positive without a major" (02/18/2016). Nate presented his ability to articulate more clearly as a specific site of personal growth from the communication major. Similarly, a female participant used the term articulate twice in one response saying, "I think it's just the way I *articulate* it as well. When I

ask about it, I am able to *articulate* what I'm doing (in the communication major) and say this is what I'm learning" (Cate, 02/01/2016). This focus on being able to articulate was significant because participants are naming their acquired skill (achieving competence by being articulate and/or being able to articulate) instead of demonstrating what being articulate might actually look like. When I asked participants to then articulate a specific example or time that shaped personal growth, their focus remained on being competent communicators instead of articulating the actual event. "Being articulate" was used as a taken-for-granted ability without reference to instances when students put that ability to use. Another participant expressed to the researcher, "I think when you do get everything out of the comm classes that you can and you sit down and have conversations with people then you can *articulate* and actually say intelligent things and it puts them in their place" (02/01/2016). This illustration emphasized how being able to articulate is a validation strategy for students.

This mixture of pride and the confidence to articulate acted as a gauge for personal growth. Cate reported, "I've always been very extroverted and outgoing, but I think taking comm classes has helped me better *articulate* things to make my conversations better and my relationships better" (02/01/2016). This expression led into the importance of improving interpersonal relationships that result in personal growth. Growth could be measured here with the specific identity talk "taking comm classes has helped me better articulate" pointing to a specific thing she has improved. Molly also used the term articulate citing "because you can communicate with people and be able to *articulate* and have conversations and just feel comfortable" as a topic of personal growth (Molly, 01/28/2016). The term "articulate" was identified through in-vivo coding emphasizing a particular category of identity work for

communication majors. Communication majors valued their personal growth by developing certain skills as seen through the appreciation of gained perspective and the ability to articulate.

Subtheme 3: "Let's sit down and talk about it like adults". Other participants shared how they have improved their personal relationships through their communication education resulting in personal growth. This was a reflection of self-identity because participants expressed forming and maintaining relationships has become of utmost importance in daily life. As the previous literature suggested, healthy and fulfilling interpersonal relationships are a critical part of human happiness (Cameron, 2000). For example, several participants talked about how they have become better observers and reached a level of maturity that has improved their relationships with others. Matthew explained how the major had made him better at observing and picking up on non-verbal cues with his significant other. Through his communication classes, he was able to identify problematic situations and address them before they got out of control. Alayna performed identity talk by explaining how her relationships have improved through the communication major.

I mean it has helped with my relationships I think, being a better listener. Noticing certain patterns in people and like I don't know, all around it does help you in your personal life. It makes you really second guess how you communicate as a person, doing interpersonal communication... So like learning how to listen, I never even thought about that until I took the class and I was like wow I need to listen more. Just listen. (Alayna, 02/24/2016)

Becoming more observant overall, whether through listening or simply observing, had become apart of participants' personal identities. Managing relationships goes beyond simply improving communication skills. Molly provided an example of growth by comparing how she handled situations in the past and how the communication major had given her a more mature approach. This highlight of "then" and "now" provided clarity on how she had experienced personal growth.

I've learned how to better manage my relationships between people and I instantly know if there's a problem I'm one of those people now who's like if we have a problem let's sit down and talk about it like adults instead of doing some you know what I mean like at first definitely freshmen sophomore year... I'm going to send a nasty text or not going to talk to that person but by the time junior year hit ok I've definitely learned a lot more through comm and like this is more mature and this is how I should be handling things and I think comm really helped me learn those things, especially with interpersonal. (Molly, 01/28/2016)

Molly, a senior approaching graduation, reported that by handling her interpersonal relationships with greater maturity she had grown. Her story and her claim about who she is now was a performance of identity talk presenting herself as a more mature individual. Additionally, a male participant spoke about his improved relationship with his mother and other family members because of the communication major. When asked how the major had impacted him, he replied.

Yeah, first thing that I think of is with my family. With any family you're going to come across issues, every family is crazy. A lot of people will argue that their family is crazy but every single family is crazy and because of the communication I've been able to be a mediator in so many issues going on in my family which has helped a lot... (Nate, 02/18/2016)

The reoccurring topic of improved maintenance of relationships with family, friends, and significant others confirmed that communication majors value who they are in an interpersonal relationship. The participants showed their own growth in compassion and maturity by emphasizing how stronger relationships have been made a priority through communication classes, such as interpersonal communication. Cate explained how her newfound ability to be adaptable has improved her interpersonal relationships.

I think it really helps you to understand why people are the way they are and when you can pick up on those things in your conversations it helps you to adapt to that better and I think that's a very big key thing in growing up and moving into the world is being adaptable. And also making stronger forming stronger relationships because you know how to communicate with them really well. (Cate, 02/01/2016)

Cate said how “it” (i.e. the communication major) helped her with her relationships explaining it as the key to her success. Overall, participants made sense of their personal and interpersonal growth through the lens of the communication major. Students did not attribute this personal development to higher education and the university experience, overall.

On the topic of improvement in interpersonal relationships, responses talking about their favorite part of the major included, “Interpersonal communication. Every class that involved this topic has significantly changed how I interact with people on a daily basis and I will carry these skills with me forever” and “It has taught me a lot about how I communicate in relationships and how to make myself a better partner”. Since the surveys were anonymous, students had the opportunity to express their true feelings about their growth while at the university. These findings support the theme of overall personal growth validating that academics influence self-identity both during and after the undergraduate communication program.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Rationale

The desire to conduct this research stemmed from a lack of scholarly attention to social science students in higher education and a shortage of understanding communication students' identity navigation. As past literature has revealed, there has been a focus on majors, such as the STEM majors, in the past that have provided insight into those students' personal and academic identities. My research has aimed to reveal the way an intersection of student concerns (identity, the communication major, contradictory discourse) can provide worthwhile understanding. It is clear that communication students exist in a unique social and cultural environment where they feel the need to actively perform their identity, including during the research interview process. The data creates empirical claims that give insight into communication major's actions of identity talk.

Results & Previous Research

This section synthesizes the research and interview data to draw observed conclusions about communication majors' identities. First, I retrace the main themes, positioning the communication identity, pride and growth through better communication, to describe how the results aligned with previous research. Then, I discuss the prevalence of identities in opposition and the reinforcement of contradiction present in the collected data.

Positioning the Communication Identity. The findings both connected with previous research and added new insights to the conversation on students' academic and personal identity. Existing research did not specifically address students using supplemental experiences to position their communication major because most past literature focused on the communication major itself or student identity. As I suspected, the findings confirmed that the communication

major was undervalued at the university, especially by students' peers (Carpenter & McEwan, 2013). The findings pointed to a greater volume of criticism from fellow peers at the university than from outside sources. This created a communicative dilemma for students as they balanced their strategic position emphasizing supplemental experiences and pride in the major. The negative talk and discourse stemming from other students is interesting because it gives them a particular type of power to impact how communication students speak about their major. The discourse of feeling undervalued was prevalent among participant's responses, which explains why participants felt the need to validate their actions or create a personal connection when performing identity talk to others. This research confirmed that contradictory discourse does present challenges for communication majors, as they want to be taken seriously as students and intelligent individuals. This includes participants citing the lack of respect (Nate), the stigma people have (Molly) and the communication major as a joke (Patrice). This communicative dilemma forces students to prove that communication is a legitimate area of study because it has made them better communicators and, therefore, is valued in society. The contradictory discourse is driven by not only students outside the major commenting on the major's perceived value, but also communication students themselves. This clearly influences the way students articulate and present themselves, whether talking about their identity or the major. The data reveals a uniqueness of challenges that may or may not exist in more respected and understood academic majors.

Participants' construction of self is responding to these challenges by supporting the value of the communication major with additional experiences. When we think about how people are performing identity work to others, students seem to be acting in a situation of challenge, self-doubt or insecurity. Participants' reports and performance of identity lined up with

Goffman's concept of identity as a communicative performance through verbal expression (Carbaugh, 1996). Participant's identity performance took shape in response to a social situation, which in most cases was with regard to how participants explain their major to others. The need to position the communication identity, specifically through the validation strategy, connects to possible self-doubt in academic and personal choices (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002). This self-doubt arises through others questioning or challenging why a student chose to study communication. Speakers took that self-doubt and chose language and strategies to justify their major choice. The reoccurring explanations of how a supplemental experience has enhanced their major became a way for participants to maintain face. In maintaining face, participants are participating in the contradictory discourse, as students do not allow it to stand alone as a legitimate course of study. For example, Nate speaks about how he leads with the business degree to earn people's respect (02/18/2016). He is maintaining face by positioning his communication major with a supplemental experience thereby adding to the contradiction that the communication major itself has value. Additionally, many students referenced their personality as a justification to why they choose the communication major. This aligns with Porter & Umbach's research concluding that personality scales and types were stronger predictors of major choice than other factors (2006). Participants' personal connection to the major through personality (i.e. being talkative in high school) proved to be another way students positioned their choice to major in communication. The participants' frequent mentions of supplemental experiences and connections proves that being able to position the major a specific way is an aspect of the communication students' identities.

Communication Major Pride. In contrast to the previous research on having to validate why students choose to study communication, the study exposed an important theme that was not

found in past research. The participants expressed an explicit sense of pride in their identity as a communication major. The concept that talk shapes identities and identities shape talk is extremely important here as participants communicated their belonging through identification in various groups, such as being part of the communication major (Tracy & Robles, 2013). The amount of pride a participant expressed guided how they performed and reported identity talk. By distancing themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with the communication major, expressing pride is a way participants navigate inconsistencies around the major and communicate that through identity talk. This gives insight into the first research question where I ask how students perform identity work to construct an identity.

The literature on academic identity stresses the importance of being committed to one's own discipline (Lairio, Puukari, & Kouvo, 2013; Henkel, 2005). The findings suggest that academic identity was strong among participants because they were so quick to verbalize how proud they were to be communication majors. This creates a tension between how they choose which identity talk to voice: either validating their academic self to others or expressing commitment to their major depending on the social context. This aligns with Beech's (2008) claim that "identity work may be a *mélange* of different identity projects, co-present within the self but distinct and potentially conflicting" (p. 52). Interestingly, participants' strong tendency to articulate their pride in the communication major to the researcher is one identity project. This contradicts how students' thought it was important to position the major in a strategic way to others confirming the overarching themes are interconnected. These identity performances are conflicting, which is common throughout identity development and enactment. There is an inconsistency in the data between how students talked about the importance of responding to contradictory discourse by positioning the major and being proud of their communication degree.

If students truly felt proud of their communication major, it would not be necessary to position the major to make it a more impressive degree. I believe this reinforces the contradiction around the communication major as I discuss below. These proud identity performances seem to be a way to justify the major on a personal level, while positioning the major is focused on explaining to others.

Growth Through Better Communication. The study produced concrete results supporting how the communication major fosters positive growth in several different realms, including personal, professional and interpersonal. An aspect of increased narrative of growth is that this study specifically focused on asking participants to explain the major and how it has shaped them. Positive results of communication aligned with past researchers' claims about the cultural belief that communication was a crucial element of all types of relationships (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981; Cameron, 2000, p.149). The data regarding growth drove the notion that students' academic identity of being a communication major has progressed to being a major part of their personal identity. Although the specific major is important to academic identity, researchers emphasize that institutional participation, interaction with peers and exposure to the university overall are large factors in shaping identity development (Lairio, Puukari, & Kouvo, 2013). Participants failed to attribute personal and interpersonal growth to the academic and broader social environment beyond the communication major. It is worthwhile to note that the interview did focus on the communication major and not the overall academic experience. It is important to separate the academic experience from the communication major because the academic experience refers to college culture overall and is shared by students across various majors on campus. It is noteworthy that students grow from the whole academic experience, but continuously cited communication as the origin of growth.

Identities in Opposition. Throughout the data in all the identified themes, there was a strong sense of identity talk focusing on opposition. Participants compared themselves to others in the major, students outside the major and people challenging their communication degree. This positioning against others is a strategic move making a statement about their academic and personal identity. Communication identity being formed in opposition to other identities is important because it ties back to the importance of the social context. Communication and identity is only valuable while embedded in a specific context in the social world (Watson, 2008). Identity discourse bases itself on cultural and social aspects giving participants many different groups to compare and contrast themselves to within the university (Carbaugh, 1996).

Kitzinger and Mandelbaum (2013) talk about identity as a membership in and perceptions of particular identity categories. Students used these categories to communicate who they are and who they are not both to others and the researcher. Participants insinuated that they made up the “50 who cared” or the “group of the ideal people who CU is looking for in the communication major” suggesting that there is an opposite group of students (Andrew, 02/12/2016). This construction of identity against another group of people emphasizes the importance of the social context. Participants also positioned themselves against their competition in the workforce, such as their peers in STEM majors. Participants stating that they were more competent in social situations and contexts “othered” the STEM majors. This is interesting because the communication student participants are explicitly putting down a group of students who are typically valued in society. Additionally, participants performed identity talk to communicate who they were as people through achieved personal growth (i.e. able to carry a conversation, capable of articulating, capable of seeing another side to things) in contrast to people outside the major depending on the context. Although opposition was briefly mentioned in the findings

chapter as a way students talked about who they were, it is important to note how it was evident throughout all the themes.

Reinforcement of Contradiction. The way students produce their own identities is just as conflict ridden as the larger society's way of thinking about communication. The conflict participants expressed between having to defend their major and being proud is a reproduction of negative discourse around the major. Identity enactment reinforces social roles and memberships in the communication major as we see here with communication students. If students participate in the creation of contradictory discourse around communication, it is important to recognize and analyze the role of the major in positioning students to counteract this contradiction.

Communication departments have a powerful role in guiding students to challenge and change the reproduction of negative discourse. The participants' tendency to contradict themselves in their statements demonstrates that the major is not effectively doing its job. The communication major is not only educating intelligent students to challenge their perceptions of the world, but also doing something for the perception of the major beyond the classroom. I argue that the collected data comments, not on the individual communication students themselves, but the communication major as a whole. Participants in the study had been trained to confront societal attitudes of valuing communication overall, by explaining that they are articulate and competent in relationships and professional life, but not the attitudes regarding the degree itself. Thus, this data creates an evaluative argument about the communication major's role to explicitly address and train students to counteract negative contradiction and attitudes. It is safe to say that communication students contribute to the contradictory environment and the communication department has the power to shift curriculum to address these issues. For example, it would be useful to have workshops or courses dedicated to career paths after college to provide students

with concrete answers to their future professional lives. Communication departments and students need the power to actively confront the stereotype and contradiction around the value of the communication major.

Limitations

Although this study produced insightful and valuable results, there were limitations to the research and methods. First, most participants, with the exception of two, were part of the researcher's social network. As a result, many students were female participants and were thus similar to the researcher within the major. This is a limitation because it does not include a diverse population of students. Second, most participants reported and performed being "good" communication students. The participants spoke about the "other 50 percent of students", yet there was no representative population in the collected data. In a major of this size at a large university, there is clearly more diversity that was not reached in the current research. Third, the researcher was a communication student at the university and participants felt the researcher knew their struggles with contradictory discourse in the communication major. This could have impacted how much participants chose to disclose to the researcher. The interview asked participants to talk about their communication major experience, which positioned the identity talk in a specific way focused on their understanding in the major. Students talk and identity construction could have been influenced by participation in a communication based project generating different types of identity construction. The limitations could inform and guide future research on how communication students do interactional identity work.

Future Research

Future research on how people communicate and construct themselves could create a deeper understanding of communication majors' identity. The current research focused on

upperclassman students who had immense experience in what it was like to be a communication major. It would be beneficial for future research to investigate how student identities form across time from the beginning of their communication education to their exit from the university. This would allow researchers to identify at what points participants acquired certain aspects of their identity. Additionally, the current research study has been an affirmative experience for participants suggesting that more research focused on communication students could be beneficial to both students and communication departments as a whole. The research could concentrate on the development of not only the communication students, but also the major overall, to intervene and confront the contradictory discourse around the value of communication.

Conclusion

This project aimed to investigate how communication majors' reported and performed identity through identity talk in the midst of contradictory and confusing discourse. Overall, there was an interesting contradiction around how communication majors' spoke about themselves in and outside the major. This discourse is reinforcing the negative stereotype around the value of the communication discipline. This occurs as communication majors position themselves to gain respect, yet are confident and proud of their communication abilities and growth from the major. Future research on communication majors and identity development could improve both the experience and value of the communication major.

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Appendix

Participant Information Document

Interview Guide

IRB Approval Letter

Participant Information Document

Age:

Gender:

In-state or out of state:

How long have you been a student at CU?

When in your college career did you choose to major in communication?

When are you graduating/planning to graduate?

Interview Guide

Opening (warm-up) questions

How happy are you with your experience at CU thus far?

Would you recommend CU to a student currently looking at colleges? Why, or why not?

Focused questions – General experience of the communication major

How would you describe yourself, overall?

Why did you choose communication as your major?

How has your experience been with the communication department?

How would you describe yourself as a student?

Focused questions – The value of the communication major

What do you think is the value of the communication major?

Do you feel like your communication degree is valued among communication majors?

What about by your non-comm major peers?

How about in society outside of the campus environment?

Focused questions – The communication major and / as identity

What is the best part of being a communication major for you, personally?

What is the worst part of being a communication major for you, personally?

What do your friends / family / acquaintances / employer think about the fact that you are a communication major?

Have they openly commented on your major? What did they say? How did you respond?

Many comm majors are asked the question: "What kind of a job can you get as a comm major?" How would you / do you respond?

Can you think of a time when your major choice has delivered benefits to you?

How would you finish the statement "Within the communication major, I am _____ blank?"

How has the communication major at CU shaped you as a person, outside of academics?

Closing questions

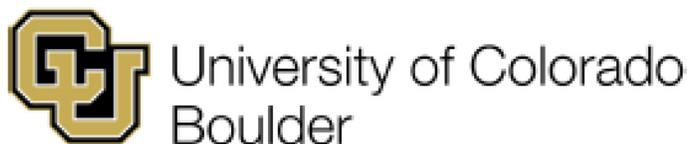
What kind of advice would you have for other communication majors?

What advice would you have for first year students looking for a major in general?

How do you think the communication major is going to shape your future?

Is there anything else about the communication major that you would like to comment on?

Do you have any questions for me before we end the interview?



Institutional Review Board
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APPROVAL

16-Dec-2015

Dear Cindy White,

On 16-Dec-2015 the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Submission:	Initial Application
Review Category:	Exempt - Category 2
Title:	The Negotiation of Communication Students' Personal and Academic Identity
Investigator:	White,Cindy
Protocol #:	15-0800
Funding:	None
Documents Approved:	15-0800 Consent Form (16Dec15); 15-0800 Protocol (16Dec15); Recruitment email; Interview guide;
Documents Reviewed:	HRP-211: FORM - Initial Application;

The IRB approved the protocol on 16-Dec-2015.

Click the link to find the approved documents for this protocol: [Approved Documents](#). Use copies of these documents to conduct your research.

In conducting this protocol you must follow the requirements listed in the [INVESTIGATOR MANUAL \(HRP-103\)](#).

Sincerely,
 Douglas Grafel
 IRB Admin Review Coordinator
 Institutional Review Board