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Digital Reconfigurations of Collective Identity on Twitter: A Narrative Approach

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Abstract: Digital technology has prompted philosophers to rethink some of the fundamental categories we use to make sense of the world and ourselves. Particularly, the concept of 'identity' and its reconfiguration in the digital age has sparked much debate in this regard. While many studies have addressed the impact of the digital on personal and social identities, the concept of 'collective identity' has been remarkably absent in such inquiries. In this article, I take the context of social movements as an entry point to discuss the reconfiguration of collective identity in social media environments. I do so by introducing a narrative approach to collective identity. I argue that Twitter's affordances invite new ways of constructing collective identities and imply a shifting relationship between the individual and the collective.

Key words: collective identity, narrative affordances, social media, Twitter, social movements

I tweet, therefore I am
(Orenstein 2010)

told and retold, "my story" becomes "our story"
(J. E. Davis 2002, 19)

1. Introduction

In the past decade, numerous philosophers have emphasized how the rise of digital technology in all domains of human life has challenged us to rethink some of the fundamental philosophical categories we use to make sense of the world and ourselves. Luciano Floridi endorsed the significance of this in his book *The Fourth Revolution:*

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How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality: digital technologies "are creating and shaping our intellectual and physical realities, changing our self-understanding, modifying how we relate to each other and ourselves, and upgrading how we interpret the world" (Floridi 2014, vi). Debates on how digital media changes our understanding of who we are started in 1995 when the internet, or so-called web 1.0 at the time, started to be widely used in Western societies. Even at this point, scholars observed how identities had become fluid: the anonymity of the internet allowed users to craft multiple identities in various online spaces (Turkle 1995). With the rise of web 2.0, or social media, in the 2000s, users engaged with digital media as a way to present their 'authentic,' 'offline' identities to semi-public, online communities. Because of this high-intensity engagement with identity presentation online, users are increasingly identified digitally through the generation and collection of personal data. They are therefore determined by quantifiable measures such as likes and friends or followers (Cheney-Lippold 2017) and by acts of self-presentation and self-labeling (Barron and Bollen 2022). Provided that digital media supports "always-under-construction identities" (Papacharissi 2015, 44), people are continuously challenged by platforms to participate in the never-ending struggle for online popularity and visibility (Bucher 2018, 88–89).

Typically, philosophers and sociologists distinguish three levels of identity (Snow and Corrigall-Brown 2015, 174): First, personal identity refers to the unique meanings associated with or attributed to oneself as an individual. Second, social identities are those meanings attributed to individuals to situate them in a social space or group. Third and lastly, collective identity refers to a specific kind of belonging to a certain group. People sharing a collective identity feel a shared sense of 'we-ness.' A distinct attribute of collective identity is that it strongly motivates people to act together in the name of a shared interest and is often explicitly distinguished from other collectives. Although the first two levels of identity, i.e., personal and social identity, have enjoyed significant attention in the research on online identities, only a few authors have attempted to address collective identities in online contexts. In this article, I will take the context of social movements as an entry point to discuss the reconfiguration of collective identity in social media environments and the theoretical implications it carries.

Traditionally, collective identity has been a central concept in understanding the success of social movements in the twentieth century. Since the rise of the internet and social media, however, social movement theorists have neglected the question of collective identity and its role in contemporary, twenty-first century movements. Various attempts have been made to counter this gap in the literature (cf. Gerbaudo and Treré 2015; Kavada 2015; Milan 2015; Monterde et al. 2015;

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Coretti and Pica 2015; McDonald 2015). However, there still is great potential to examine how collective identities are constructed and maintained, alongside their role in the different stages of a social movement in the digital age. This article intends to present an original argument to the debate by introducing a narrative approach to collective identity construction. In doing so, this account of collective identity explicitly distinguishes itself from essentialist conceptions of identity that prevail in the existing literature on contemporary activism. More precisely, this article addresses how participants of recent social movements use and can make use of the affordances of social media, particularly Twitter, to construct collective identities through collective storytelling. I argue that while there are some limits to collective storytelling on Twitter, users can overcome these constraints in creative new ways, for instance by connecting 'small stories' through hashtags or the 'quote tweet' function. The philosophical significance of this approach lies in how the recent use of social media by social movements invites us to rethink the concept of collective identity.

I start in Section 2 with a critical assessment of the claim that collective identity has lost its relevance in contemporary social movements. I show that such claims assume an essentialist conception of collective identity and therefore fail to account for the dynamic ways in which those identities are constructed and maintained. In Section 3, I develop an alternative, constructionist, and narrative approach to collective identity by showing how storytelling is an important aspect of collective identity construction in general and social movements in particular. In Section 4, this framework describes the 'narrative affordances' of Twitter, i.e., how Twitter as a social media platform allows the construction of stories in specific, new ways. I end in Section 5 with an analysis of the promises and limits of using these affordances for collective storytelling. I concede that, while using hashtags to collect narratives bumps into material constraints, a promising alternative method for collective storytelling has emerged: 'Twitter tunnels.' Defending the concept of Twitter tunnels helps illuminate the philosophical implications of the recent reconfigurations of collective identity construction on social media and demonstrates how the 'I' and the 'we' relate to each other in this context.

2. Collective Identity and Social Movements in the Digital Age

The concept of 'collective identity' has played a central role in theorizing social movements of the twentieth century. The extensive literature on collective identity within social movement studies suggests that the concept is crucial for understanding all stages of a protest movement: the creation of collective claims, the

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recruitment of protestors, the strategic decision making, and the outcomes and aftermath of the movement (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 283). Throughout these stages, the presence of a collective identity seems to explain the commitment and solidarity among participants, the long-lasting impact on the participants' identities, and the response dynamic between protestors and their opponents (Hunt and Benford 1994, 448–49). Generally, the presence of a solid collective identity has been considered a key factor for the success of a movement on various levels (Blumer 1939; Gusfield 1994), as has been showcased recently by the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements (Yang 2016; Page and Arcy 2020). First, the identification of a group of people as a collective seems to enhance the chances of mobilizing people to participate in a social movement (Dixon and Roscigno 2003; Liss, Crawford, and Popp 2004; Corrigall-Brown et al. 2009). Second, as one of the primary theorists studying collective identity Alberto Melucci writes, the sense of a collective identity positively impacts "[t]he propensity of an individual to become involved in collective action" (Melucci 1988, 343; cf. Klapp 1969; Turner and Killian 1987, 341). Third, without any identification with a larger collective, it is improbable that a social movement enjoys the consistent commitment of its participants (Gamson 1991, 27). Together, these findings suggest two ways in which collective identity is intimately involved in the success of social movements: "social movements are both dependent on and generative of collective identity" (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 283).

Given the above overview, it may be surprising that the concept of collective identity has remained absent in recent analyses of social movements. In trying to distinguish between traditional and contemporary activism, there is a common belief among various authors that the role of collective identity in social movements has severely declined. There are two substantial reasons for this: First, the role of ideology as the driving force of participatory politics seems to have been substituted for 'issue-based participation' (Baetens, De Graef, and Mandolessi 2020, 174). Ideologies provide a sense of coherence and a common affective-epistemological foundation for collective action; as such, they seem to be a core component for successful political mobilization. This attachment to a common ideology triggers a strong loyalty to the collective (Vromen 2017, 23). However, in recent decades a new space for political action has taken form, in which "individual citizens do not need to join and show loyalty towards interest articulating structures to become involved in what they deem are urgent issues of politics and society" (Micheletti 2005, 28). People can engage in a narrow issue without subscribing to a whole set of values. In other words, participation in protest movements has become highly

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personalized. Second, and related to this, W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg have argued that twenty-first century protest is no longer built on collective identity but on connective action. This conceptual shift signals a move towards more personalized forms of communication with 'networks' replacing 'collectives.' Subsequently, the need for a strong sense of group identification as found in collective action gets lost (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 2), or as Malcolm Gladwell puts it: "platforms of social media are built around *weak ties*" (Gladwell 2010, my emphasis).

These authors argue that a loss of ideology as a coherent driving force of participation implies a loss of collective identity as a critical component of social movements. This claim relies on a twofold assumption, a descriptive and a normative one: i) a collective identity is pre-given (through ideology, race, class, gender, etc.), and ii) a social movement is supposed to 'execute' or 'perform' that pre-given identity. The analyses of contemporary protests above thus starts from an essentialist conception of identity. As the first assumption suggests, a collective identity can be 'pre-given' through either 'biological' ascriptive attributes such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or through structural commonalities, such as social class or nationality. These assumptions adopt primordialist and structuralist conceptions of identity, granting that certain common characteristics automatically generate a shared identity (Snow and Corrigall-Brown 2015, 175). The second assumption implies that the actions of a social movement should serve that pre-given collective identity. Accordingly, the presence of individual actions or interests is incompatible with constituting a collective: when the role of the individual in the movement rises, the role of collective identity declines. In this sense, forming a collective identity entails a dissolution of the individual 'I' into the 'we' or moving from individual to collective agency (Milan 2015, 892).

The problem with this essentialist framework is that it ignores the dynamic character of collective identity formation. Shared bonds are not necessarily pre-given, but can be created, collapse, and be re-constructed (Snow and Corrigall-Brown 2015, 176). In this essay, I will adopt an alternative constructionist approach to collective identity. Such an approach recognizes that the link between a group of people that is primordially or structurally commonly situated and the existence of a common identity is not as deterministic as the essentialist understanding of identity posits (Snow and Corrigall-Brown 2015, 176). In her latest book, Chantal Mouffe defends such a constructionist conception of political identity. She addresses the critique that in trying to create 'a people,' the left-populist movement inevitably produces a 'homogeneous subject,' incompatible with democratic plu-

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ralism (Mouffe 2019, 62). Mouffe responds that such a critique fails to grasp how 'a people' is constructed, i.e., not based on an empirical referent but as a discursive political construction. 'Discursive' means that "it does not exist previously to its performative articulation" (Mouffe 2019, 63). In addition, the construction of a collective identity is not necessarily similar to the creation of a 'mass,' in which all differentiation does seem to appear to create a homogeneous group. Rather, such a construction entails establishing 'chains of equivalence' between a range of heterogeneous demands while preserving the internal differentiations of the collective. Thus, the question becomes not how collective identities as pre-given states are performed and expressed but *how they are constructed and maintained* within the context of recent social movements.

3. A Narrative Approach to Collective Identity

Narrative storytelling is widely regarded as an essential element of human existence (Carr 1986, 117; Bruner 1987, 708; Polkinghorne 1988, 1). The most distinct feature of the narrative form, according to the existing literature, is how it presents a 'temporal sequence': "to understand an event narratively [. . .] is to locate it within the temporal and relational sequence of a story, linking it with both previous and subsequent events over time" (J. E. Davis 2002, 12). A narrative recapitulates past experiences with a progression from the beginning through the middle to the end. Moreover, narratives have different characters, of which the division into protagonists, antagonists, and bystanders determines from which point of view the story is told (Polletta and Chen 2017, 492). These characteristics of narrative motivated some authors to address the narrative aspects of personal identities. As Hannah Arendt argued, 'who' one is can never be captured by 'what' one is (2018, 11). The disclosure of who we are happens through speech and action in the public realm and constitutes a unique life story affecting the life stories of all those with whom one comes into contact (Arendt 2018, 184). Influenced by Arendt's analysis of the 'who,' Paul Ricœur argued that a concept of 'narrative identity' allows one to understand how identities can both change and remain stable simultaneously, namely through the stories they enact (2008, 246). The concept of narrative identity seems thus especially well-suited to develop a framework that rejects an essentialist conception of identity.

Such a rejection of essentialist identity categories also occurs in forming and conceptualizing collective identities. Joseph E. Davis remarks that storytelling is an inherently social process that establishes a communicative relationship. Telling stories creates affective bonds that allow for identification between the

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reader and the teller, or more importantly in this article, among tellers of a similar story. It allows reaffirmation of one's position in a community with particular attributes: "told and retold, 'my story' becomes 'our story'" (J. E. Davis 2002, 19). This announces the existence of 'collective narratives': a set of stories that unite similar experiences in a shared bond. Stories like these play an important role in constituting a collective identity (Salzer 1998). Such collective narratives have been particularly instrumental in resisting dominant but faulty narratives about certain events or groups of people (Kinloch, Penn, and Burkhard 2020, 384). In the past decades, we have witnessed notable attempts to counter stereotypical and essentialist categorizations by, for instance, working-class Mexican Americans (Lee and Anderson 2009) and Moroccan-Dutch young adults (Prins et al. 2013). The latter case shows that collective narratives can establish a cohesive sense of group identity without strict agreements: "Our participants' storytelling supported a collective identity but their stories were at the same time diverse and in some ways inconsistent" (Prins et al. 2013, 95). In the context of Twitter, stories accompanying hashtags such as #MyAsianAmericanStory, #ILookLikeAnEngineer, and #WhyIStayed have been used to counter respectively how Asian-Americans and engineers have been portrayed in mainstream media and why people have stayed within abusive relationships (Ray et al. 2017; cf. Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2020).

Narrativity has also been considered an essential feature of social movements because of their temporal and processual nature (Cathcart 1978; Griffin 2003). Like plots in literary works, social movements progress from a beginning towards an endpoint. This endpoint need not be a literal termination of events but can be a teleologically valued goal that a movement tries to reach through a sequence of conflict and action (J. E. Davis 2002, 12–13). Additionally, storytelling is an important tool for persuading and recruiting people. Unlike rational discourse, stories have the special ability to communicate lived experiences. Such accounts of how people actually experience certain events or systems awaken something in people in ways that arguments cannot do (Polletta and Chen 2017, 487). Stories incentivize people to identify with the characters portrayed in the story and thus with the struggles these characters are confronted with (Polletta and Chen 2017, 492). As empirical research has shown, people who are immersed in a story tend to adhere to the beliefs and claims put forward in the story (Green and Brock 2000). Because of these reasons, several authors have defended the importance of storytelling as a concept to understand the various dimensions of a social movement, ranging from the origins of contentious actions (Alexander 2016; Polletta

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2006) to the sustainability of movements as well as their long-term success and failure (Meyer 2006).

When combined, storytelling seems a productive concept for understanding how collective identities are constructed and maintained within the context of social movements. Indeed, collective storytelling appears to be an important instrument of social movements in providing collective resistance to a dominant narrative. Two examples of twentieth century movements illustrate this point: Internally, i.e., within a social movement's collective, the continuous exchange of personal stories with the collective has helped to "foster, sustain, and guide movement participation and allegiance" (Fine 2002, 20). In the 1960s, such internal storied processes were crucial in the student sit-in protests against racial segregation in North Carolina. According to Francesca Polletta, these shared narratives added coherence and a sense of direction to the movement against the chaos and rapidly unfolding events in the background. Sustaining a collective identity through storytelling was necessary to incentivize and re-incentivize people to engage in high-risk protests (Polletta 2002). Externally, so in relation to the sphere 'outside' the collective, storytelling has been used to counter conceptions of participants in the Gay Liberation movement. To fight the perception that gay bars were generally racist, the National Association of Black and White Men Together (BMWT) was formed (Broad 2020, 513). The collective portrayed itself through stories as an interracial loving community with testimonies of Black and white gay men finding mutual support in gay bars. This movement's goal was to counter a single-axis narrative of emancipation and construct a collective identity beyond primordial or structural identity categories by constituting an intersectional, gay antiracist community (Broad 2020, 529). These accounts suggest a fruitful pathway for analyzing collective identity formation within the context of social movements in the twenty-first century. They raise the question of how collective storytelling forms in contemporary contexts where social media plays a significant role in protest organizations.

4. Narrative Affordances of Twitter

In order to get a sense of how social movement participants use social media platforms to construct collective identities through storytelling, the material properties of those platforms must be considered. Simultaneously, we should avoid falling into the trap of technological determinism and completely ignoring the platform's material constraints. Therefore, it is useful to adopt the notion of 'affordances,' as it "both takes into account the ways in which technologies are socially constructed

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and situated and materially constraining and enabling" (Bucher and Helmond 2018, 238; cf. Nagy and Neff 2015, 2). The concept of affordances was coined in the ecological psychology of James J. Gibson (1979). He did so to account for the specific ways (human and non-human) animals perceive their environment. According to Gibson, we do not immediately perceive our environment neutrally but always through the possibilities of action it provides. The natural environment surrounding me, then, affords certain actions to me. For instance, a rock affords me to sit on it because of its solid nature, while a lake obviously does not. Likewise, a knob on a door affords me to turn it and consequently open or close that door (Norman 1990, 9).

While the basic conception of affordances has been well-received within the literature on human-technology interactions, it has been criticized for its predominantly binary understanding of affordances. Jenny L. Davis remarks that this is partly due to the misleading question guiding most of the research on the affordances of designed products, namely: 'What does an object afford?' Posing the question this way forces us to assume that an object either affords a certain action or not. This 'either-or rendition' of what an object affords leaves out the nuanced degrees and modes in which an object can afford something. The question for Davis is thus not what artifacts afford but *how* artifacts afford (J. L. Davis 2020, 63). Therefore, I adopt a particular framework of affordances inspired by recent developments within the debate, starting from Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. Inspired by Gibson's affordance theory (Latour 2007, 72, 83), Latour defended a fundamentally posthuman and relational conception of agency. While agency has traditionally been located in the human actor, actor-network theory proposes that objects generally, and technological artefacts in particular, have the ability to 'act' in certain ways: "things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (Latour 2007, 72).

Unfortunately, while Latour hints at the different modalities an object can afford and constrain certain actions, he does not fully theorize them. Davis' most recent work helpfully refines the affordance framework by categorizing three recurring types of 'mechanisms of affordance,' as schematically summarized in table 1 (based on Davis and Chouinard 2016).

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Table 1. Overview of mechanisms of affordance (based on J.L. Davis and Chouinard 2016).

Type of mechanism	Mechanisms of affordance	Example
Bids placed by technological objects on user-subjects	1.a) **Requests**: pushes a subject in a certain direction, but still leaves room for divergence 1.b) **Demands**: makes a certain line of action inevitable when using the artefact	Facebook *requests* that users include a profile image Facebook *demands* that users select a gender category before signing up
Artifact's response to things a subject may wish to do with it	2.a) **Encourage**: welcomes a certain line of action compared to other lines of action 2.b) **Discourage**: creates barriers to a particular line of action compared to other lines of action 2.c) **Refuse**: makes a certain line of action unavailable to users	Like buttons *encourage* network interaction Tinder *discourages* careful selection of a partner Skype *refuses* two people calling to look directly into each other's eyes
Pertaining equally to bids from technological objects and the object's response to user-subjects	3) **Allow**: makes certain action available, while remaining indifferent to if and/or how a particular feature is used, and to what outcome	Snapchat allows users to select which filter they apply to their picture and with whom to share

In Davis's approach, she usefully distinguishes between action possibilities and constraints that emerge from the technology itself (e.g., a speed bump 'requiring' drivers to slow down) versus affordances emerging from the technology's response to certain (attempted, intended or wished for) actions by its users (e.g., a vehicle 'refusing' to lock its doors while the engine is still on). A third category is situated somewhere between and pertains to more neutral and multidirectional mechanisms of affordances (e.g., low hanging bridges 'allowing' small vehicles to go under, while perhaps 'refusing' buses to do so). These different mechanisms denote "analytic stopping points that help describe the intensity with which technological objects facilitate or impede particular lines of action and social dynamics" (J. L. Davis 2020, 65).

Similarly, Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond (2018) defend an explicitly relational and multilayered understanding of affordances. This means that they not only attend to how technologies allow users to perform certain actions but also to what users do to (and not just with) technology. For instance, in discussing Twitter's move from a favorite button to a like button (resp. displaying a star and a heart) and the many responses to this change, Bucher and Helmond observe that

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various affordances have been attributed to both features beyond Twitter's initially intended purpose to let users save tweets they like (2018, 245). For instance, a qualitative study by Florian Meier, David Elsweiler, and Max L.Wilson (2014) revealed 25 distinct motivations to use the favorite button on Twitter. Bucher and Helmond conclude from these findings that the ways in which users can engage with a platform are not merely dependent on the platform's technical properties but equally to how other people make use of it and thus allowing users to engage with various buttons in a shared meaningful sense (Bucher and Helmond 2018, 245). This 'multi-directionality' is a key aspect of understanding affordances in digitally mediated environments.

To deepen our understanding of the various affordances of digital platforms, it is necessary to distinguish between several types of affordances in relation to what kind of action possibilities they precisely afford. For instance, bringing in the notion of 'social affordances' allows practitioners to specify how technologies afford certain social practices exceeding an individual human-technology interaction. Considering how social activities are always embedded in materially shaped environments, social affordances have been defined as "the possibilities that technological changes afford for social relations and social structures" (Wellman 2001, 228) and as "the social structures that take shape in association with a given technical structure" (Postigo 2016, 5). A particular subtype of such affordances is 'communicative affordances,' which refers to the ways in which technical features can alter communicative practices or habits (Schrock 2015, 1232). In the same fashion, I introduce the concept of 'narrative affordances' to denote how particular storytelling practices are enabled by the user's interaction with the platform's properties. In what follows, I will describe several ways in which social media platforms, particularly Twitter, afford new ways of constructing personal and collective narratives while considering Davis' differentiation between different mechanisms of affordances.

Social media platforms are particularly suited for developing and sharing narratives for several reasons: First, the decentralized nature of publishing on social media encourages users to publish and share stories without gatekeepers. Decentralized publishing is particularly useful when developing counter-narratives or claiming the right to tell one's own story. In the context of Australia, this allowed Indigenous people to share their stories and counter and correct dominant conceptions of the colonial 'past' as produced by the government and mainstream media (Barrowcliffe 2021, 4). Second, online people can connect with other people beyond the boundaries of physical space and enjoy (potentially) higher visibility of

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the content they publish (boyd 2011, 53). Therefore, social media uniquely encourages people to share and connect stories across the globe, fostering the sense of a 'shared' narrative. Third, through its basic hypertextual navigation structure, social media platforms are inherently interactive (Deuze 2006, 66; de Mul 2010, 95). This feature allows users to contribute to the collective narrative by adding or intervening with personal stories that might resonate with the group (Khazraee and Novak 2018, 2). The fourth and last feature relevant here is what danah boyd calls the 'persistence' and 'replicability' of online content (boyd 2011, 46). Stories published on social media are automatically archived on the World Wide Web and easily duplicated. This prevents commercial and political actors from hindering the spreading of personal stories and the incremental formation of collective narratives.

Twitter, as a unique kind of social media platform, distinguishes itself from other social media on several levels: First, by imposing a 280-character limit, Twitter presents itself as a 'microblogging' platform, i.e., one essentially consisting of very short messages (Java et al. 2007). In this regard, Twitter explicitly and purposefully discourages the publication of longform content. Note, it does not refuse long-form content—users can still circumvent the platform's technical limits by adding screenshots of longer texts or composing 'threads' of tweets and thus aggregating a bundle of short messages into a larger one. Nevertheless, Twitter users encounter barriers to posting longer messages and must take additional steps, be creative and technically literate to overcome them (J. L. Davis 2020, 75). Second, compared to Facebook's friend-based social network model, Twitter has a more public and follower-based structure. Interestingly, only 4.8% of Twitter users shield their profiles from public visibility. Because of this, Twitter has been characterized as uniquely encouraging 'accessible dialogical communication in the public domain' while blurring the distinction between the public and the private sphere (Murthy 2018, 28). Third, Twitter's features of retweets and hashtags have proven to be of exceptional value to its users. The retweet function, which leads to a verbatim quotation of a certain tweet, enables quick and wide spreadability of content. They have been used to amplify and circulate specific thoughts, start a conversation with their network, validate claims or arguments, and demonstrate one's active readership of certain tweets (Papacharissi 2015, 48). The hashtag, which is now widespread across all social media platforms and beyond, originated on Twitter as a feature to label individual tweets and link them to a larger conversation or topic (Murthy 2018, 23). It has become the default mode of connecting thoughts that might otherwise remain isolated and hidden. Together, the retweet

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and the hashtag have made Twitter into an essentially imitative network simultaneously "made up of 'intentionally acting individuals' and as a 'crowd' of affective contagions" (Sharma 2013, 61).

In her research on the types of content and expression that the platform of Twitter invites (or using Davis' terminology: 'encourages'), Zizi Papacharissi found that Twitter is experienced as a uniquely fitting platform for new kinds of (collaborative) storytelling (Papacharissi 2015, 34). This is partly due to the 'ambient co-presence' that Twitter suggests, as is typical for instantaneous microblogging platforms (Murthy 2018, 58; cf. Ebner and Schiefner 2008). This virtual 'closeness' can successfully compensate for the physical absence of others by generating a continuous 'peripheral awareness and ambient community' (Erickson 2010, 1194; Licoppe 2004). This 'always-on architecture,' as Papacharissi (2015, 53) calls it, combined with the platform-specific affordances of Twitter, as discussed above, encourages a certain kind of storytelling that differs from the traditional prototypical narrative model (which the platform discourages). Due to the 280-character limit of tweets, storytelling on Twitter tends to privilege "short bursts of communication rich in co-participation and interactivity" (Dayter 2015, 21). These short bursts allow users to develop so-called 'small stories' that initially represent fragmented everyday narratives. This does not imply, however, that such stories are less valuable. On the contrary, short stories capture a small but significant part of the lived experience of users (Georgakopoulou 2007, 148). These short stories tend to serve solidarity building rather than an informative purpose, as they encourage more co-construction than traditional 'larger' stories (Georgakopoulou 2014). Therefore, discursive collective identity formation on Twitter happens cumulatively: starting with numerous seemingly isolated and fragmented narratives, they slowly develop into a comprehensive picture that constitutes a collective narrative (Dayter 2015, 26). These affordances to connect various personal narratives into a collective one are infused with affective gestures, creating what Mouffe called 'chains of equivalence' (Papacharissi 2012, 2002). As Papacharissi concludes in her book *Affective Publics*: "Technologies network us *but it is narratives that connect us to each other*, making us feel close to some and distancing us from others" (Papacharissi 2015, 5, my emphasis).

5. Collective Identity through Collective Storytelling

As noted in Section 2, ideologically-driven collective identities' strength was that they provided a natural sense of coherence and a common foundation for collective action. More generally, identity formation based on pre-given or socio-structural

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attributes constituted a presumed attachment to a shared cause that triggered a strong sense of loyalty among individuals. In turning to more non-essentialist, narrative constructions of collective identity, it became clear that such a coherence was not lost but reconfigured. The coherence of a story is an important condition of the persuasiveness and believability of the narrative. As Walter Fisher notes, audiences assess stories based on whether they are presented in a coherent, reliable way and whether they appear consistent with related stories (1987, 194). Yet, in the digital age, a new challenge to this criterion arises: the coherence of a shared narrative seems to be at risk due to its interactive nature (Cardona-Rivera 2011, 250). In this last section, I sketch and examine two ways users of Twitter have dealt with this conflict between user interaction and story coherence: through the use of hashtags and through what I call the collaborative construction of 'Twitter tunnels.'

Participants in protest movements have extensively used Twitter's features to connect personal stories into a collective narrative. One feature that has probably been the most popular for activist purposes is the hashtag. The now widely used concept 'hashtag activism' (Yang 2016; Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2020) highlights that "[u]sing a hashtag is now, like protesting or marching, a form of political activism" (Booten 2019, 183). The hashtag's widespread use mirrors the move from ideology- to issue-driven participation. As Papacharissi notes, hashtags allow individuals to become part of a movement "without having to enter into complex negotiations of ideological affiliation" (2014, 88). Hashtags afford, and even encourage, unique ways of 'indexing' stories with a common theme (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 5), as recent examples of #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #GirlsLikeUs show. Furthermore, Twitter allows connections between various collective narratives by 'sequencing hashtags,' thereby again enacting 'chains of equivalence' between very different protest movements (Booten 2019, 189). Conversely, hashtag sequences have also been used to distinguish certain movements from others. In doing so, Twitter users designate adversaries through the establishment of a us-them distinction, which, according to Mouffe, is an essential aspect of collective identity construction (Mouffe 2019, 63). Lastly, hashtags enable forms of identification that are not necessarily fixed or static. Well-known hashtags such as #BringBackOurGirls and #HandsUpDontShoot have shown to be open to redefinition and re-appropriation. They serve as framing tools to render 'networked publics' in which people can share their story collectively but also on their own terms (Papacharissi 2016, 308). The hashtag thus seems a promising

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and flexible device for constructing collective identities through storytelling while rejecting essentialist identity categories.

However, what makes the hashtag successful simultaneously threatens its promise to construct collective identities within the context of a social movement. On the one hand, hashtags are easily 'hijacked' by adversaries: Discursive analyses show, for instance, that #BlackLivesMatter is not always used to refer to the movement in a supportive way. Instead, opponents of the BLM-movement have used the hashtag precisely to reject the movement. As Kyle Booten's study revealed, #BlackLivesMatter has been used to change the topic of the movement, to mock the changes it demands, and to expand the reach of the hashtag to such an extent that it distorts the coherence of narratives it aims to sustain (Booten 2019, 187–88). Similarly, parodies of the hashtag—#AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter—were launched to counter and ridicule the #BLM-movement (Gallagher et al. 2018). On the other hand, the material properties of Twitter itself disrupt the temporal order of its content publishing. It especially does so through 'algorithmic subversions' of the temporal order (Milan 2015, 890) or what Taina Bucher called 'programmed sociality' (2018, 4). This subversion undermines a core attribute of the narrative structure: the temporal sequence and coherence of stories. Although hashtags provide some way to deal with the fragmented nature of content publishing on social media, it does not escape the difficulties of holding a narrative together due to the phenomena of hijacking and algorithmic subversions.

As the research of Taina Bucher (2018) indicates, users of social media have shown various ways of creatively dealing with the material constraints of the platform. We can notice similar acts of social movement participants to create a narrative coherence that is not attained through basic tweets or hashtags. In 2015, Twitter introduced a feature that has been promising for developing such coherent narratives among users, namely the 'quoted tweet': instead of merely retweeting (i.e., reposting the tweet verbatim without comment), one could add a comment to the retweet. The result is that the original tweet gets embedded below the comment on the tweet. When used consecutively—creating quoted tweets upon quoted tweets or quoting quoted tweets—so-called 'Twitter tunnels' appear (Parkinson 2015). Just like a physically constructed tunnel, a Twitter tunnel connects different elements (where individual tweets can be regarded as metaphorical 'rooms') that are not all visible at the same time. Like navigating a tunnel, a user can navigate a Twitter tunnel by clicking or tapping on the quoted tweet embedded in the original tweet (moving deeper into the tunnel). In addition, Twitter recently launched a feature that allows users to see the tweets that quoted the tweet we are looking

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at (moving 'up' in the tunnel, away from the original tweet that started the tunnel). As such, Twitter tunnels allow users to navigate an archive of actively linked individual stories that create a collective narrative when combined. The Guardian reported shortly after the launch of the quote tweet button that "within hours of the function launch, users were joining up to tell tweet-by-tweet stories" (Parkinson 2015). These Twitter tunnels allow users to overcome the algorithmic subversions of individual tweets that should form a collective narrative and the potential conflict between interactivity and story coherence. By adding your personal narrative, for example of being harassed by a police officer as a black person, to an emerging Twitter Tunnel, a collective narrative appears that structurally enjoys more stability than traditional storytelling methods on Twitter using hashtags, threads, or regular independent tweets. Bringing together narratives like this enables users to participate in collective identity construction through collective storytelling.

In the last thirty years, the visibility of transgender people has remarkably improved, most notably in the United States. Yet, trans people still occupy a marginalized position in mainstream media as well as in LGBTQ+, feminist and race-based counterpublics (Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2020, 65). Online media have been particularly helpful in community building among trans people and the sharing and preserving of stories about trans people's lives that would otherwise remain untold (Rawson 2014, 40). A brief case study of the online trans activist movement #GirlsLikeUs illustrates the use and attractiveness of Twitter tunnels: In 2012, the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs was launched by trans advocate, author, and TV host Janet Mock (@janetmock 2012). Transwomen on Twitter quickly started to use the hashtag to connect with other trans people to counter mainstream narratives about trans people, and to celebrate their identities. As a result, the movement successfully built a "community from within while centering and normalizing trans lives to outside observers" (Jackson, Bailey, and Welles 2020, 83).

These particularities of the movement become visible in the following Twitter tunnel. The first tweet starting the tunnel—and still publicly available—was published by @ElectricClair (2020). This tweet shows the author's transition between 2016 and 2020 through two selfies. This tweet was quoted by two users, one by @earthagae (2020), including two similar selfies representing the same transition between 2016 and 2020. This quote was again quoted in 15 other tweets, joining the sharing of their transitioning stories through photos. One of those tweets (@im_just_laur 2020) was quoted again 13 times. A tunnel-like structure of individual tweets emerges, contributing to a collective narrative. Each of these tweets can be understood as metaphorical 'rooms' connected through tunnels.

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While not all tweets (thus small stories) are visible at once, they can be interactively navigated by clicking on the embedded quoted tweets or through the button "[number] Quote Tweets" below the quoted tweet. Notably, not all tweets in this particular Twitter tunnel referred to the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs, but were still part of the collective narrative prompted by that hashtag due to their connections established through Twitter's quote function. A strong sense of coherence and stability distinguishes this kind of collective narrative and collective identity building from hashtag-based narratives. As a user, when coming across one of these tweets, I am encouraged to start navigating the linked tweets/stories either 'upwards' or 'downwards' in the tunnel.

Here, the specificity of affordances within a digitally mediated environment rises to the surface compared to a natural environment. As indicated in Section 4, affordance theory was originally intended as a general theory of visual perception. More specifically, it was developed to account for the relationship between action and perception in natural, i.e., not mediated, environments. A key difference between these two types of environments is that natural environments and their affordances remain stable regardless of how the observer interacts with them, while digital environments are increasingly dynamic and malleable (Bucher and Helmond 2018, 248). In addition, the case of narrative affordances confirms that the platform's affordances are not merely dependent on its technical features. The phenomenon of Twitter tunnels illustrates this: the ability of users to engage in collective identity formation by contributing to an aggregative structure of quoted tweets upon quoted tweets is only partly given by the features that Twitter itself has designed. The quote tweet button is insufficient to establish the narrative affordances that Twitter tunnels do. They are also dependent on certain (collective) actions by other users. As Bucher and Helmond note, "the digital environment does not merely offer something to its users, users' needs and individual likings and behaviors increasingly play a generative role in producing those very offerings in the first place" (Bucher and Helmond 2018, 248). This resembles Gibson's initial observation that "the richest and most elaborate affordances of the environment are provided by other animals and, for us, other people" (Gibson 1979, 126). This emphasizes an aspect often overlooked in digital media accounts, namely the socio-technical nature of narrative affordances in constructing collective identities on Twitter. The ability of users to engage in Twitter tunnel thus fundamentally depends on an intersubjective experience of the potentialities linked to the platform's features.

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These new and alternative ways of constructing collective identities by using social media platforms such as Twitter also suggest a shifting relationship between the individual 'I' and the collective 'we.' As indicated in Section 2, the essentialist conception of collective identity assumes that individual acts are incompatible with collective ones. More precisely, increasing the role of the individual is said to threaten the stability of a collective identity. Collective identities in this understanding entail dissolution of the 'I' into the 'we,' alongside transferring individual agency to collective agency. This is clearly the case in collective identities that are strongly shaped by ideologies or common structural oppressions, in which the individual experience is inferior to the struggles that define the collective. We see in the more dynamic construction of collective identity through Twitter tunnels that individual acts contribute to a collective identity while retaining their individuality. The individual remains the protagonist of their private stories while still adding to a larger narrative. In other words, collective identity construction removes its 'representational' dimension and becomes more 'performative.' They establish 'chains of equivalence' (Mouffe 2019, 63), which ties them into a coherent narrative. Tweets in this context do not function as a narrative 'representation' of a pre-given collective identity but collectively 'perform' a collective identity into being.

The collective sharing of private, subjective experiences narrated within the confines of a Tweet defines a group's collective identity. Together, these developments encourage us to see how Twitter demands that collective identity formation is simultaneously individualistic and communal:

> our social lives are not constructed from a mutually exclusive relationship between me-centric and society-centric. Rather, many of our daily activities straddle both. Twitter follows suit and is simultaneously individualistic and communal (as well as banal and profound). (Murthy 2018, 198)

Conclusion

Twitter's material affordances and constraints allow the construction of narratives in new but relevant ways for contemporary social movements. Twitter encourages the formation of 'small stories' that give a voice to the lived experience of people. Sharing those experiences with people with similar experiences can create a sense of collective identity. A feature of Twitter that has been instrumental for cultivating collective identity is the hashtag. However, the use of hashtags poses some significant constraints in constructing a collective narrative. As an alternative, the

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emergence of so-called 'Twitter tunnels' allow the collection of stories in a more stable and coherent way than hashtags do. These new ways of constructing collective identities suggest a shifting relationship between the individual 'I' and the collective 'we.' While traditional, essentialist conceptions of collective identity assumed that performing these identities entailed a dissolution of the 'I' into the 'we,' when employing Twitter tunnels, individual acts contribute to a collective identity while retaining their individuality.

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