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USERNAMES OF GHANAIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ON WHATSAPP: AN ELECTRONIC SOCIO-ONOMASTIC STUDY

CHARLES LARBI AMPOFO

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USERNAMES OF GHANAIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ON WHATSAPP: AN ELECTRONIC SOCIO-ONOMASTIC STUDY

BY

CHARLES LARBI AMPOFO

Thesis submitted to the Department of English of the Faculty of Arts, College of Humanities and Legal Studies, University of Cape Coast, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Philosophy degree in English Language

NOVEMBER, 2023

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DECLARATION

Candidate's Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own original research and that no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or elsewhere.

Candidate's Signature: …….. Date: …….

Name: Charles Larbi Ampofo

Supervisors' Declaration

I hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of the thesis were supervised in accordance with the guidelines on supervision of thesis laid down by the University of Cape Coast.

Supervisor's Signature: …… Date: ……..

Name: Dr. Lena Awoonor-Aziaku

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ABSTRACT

Several studies have been carried out on names, and how names are used as linguistic resource for identity construction in the traditional offline society. The advent of internet has led to the formation of online communities where offline socio-cultural practices such as naming and identity construction have been transported to. Consequentially, this study sought to investigate the categories of username students of the University of Cape Coast use on WhatsApp, the factors that influenced their choice of usernames and how they use these names to construct their online identity. Using Kozinets' netnographic approach and the concepts of virtual community, symbolic interactionism and Goffman's presentation of self in everyday life, as well as Aldrin's theory on naming and identity, 138 usernames were analysed. The findings indicated that the students used real names, nicknames and other symbols such as emojis as their WhatsApp usernames. The choice of the usernames was due to several factors such as the desire for easy identification, to be anonymous, to reflect the character of a popular person, and also to inform about some happenings in the participants' immediate environment. The findings also showed that the students used their usernames to construct their religious, music, academic, institutional or group affiliation, family, sports, and self identities. The study contributes to the general scholarship on names and identity and also makes significant contributions to internet naming practices in particular.

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KEY WORDS

Identity

Identity construction

Online communities

Social media networks

Socio-onomastics

Usernames

WhatsApp

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of my late grandmother, Alice Ohenewa Kwaasi.

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LIST OF ACRONYMNS

CA	Content Analysis
CMC	Computer mediated communication
IRC	Internet Relay Chat
ITA	Inductive Thematic Analysis
NIT	Naming and Identity Theory
SI	Symbolic Interactionism
SMNs	Social Media Networks
TA	Thematic Analysis
UCC	University of Cape Coast
UCC-IRB	University of Cape Coast-Institutional Review Board
VC	Virtual Community

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Names and naming practices have played and continue to play a significant role in any society. The advent of technology seems to have brought about new communities which exist in online spaces. Some scholars (e.g. Aleksiejuk, 2015) have argued that online communities reflect that of the traditional offline communities, and as a result, share similar practices. Names and naming practices seem to be one of the many traditional offline community practices which are found in online communities. Of particular significance of names in every culture is how names are used as instrument of identity construction. Following this, some attention has been devoted to the study of the names and the naming practices in some online communities of people in other parts of the world. In Ghana, though extensive literature exists on names and identity construction of some traditional offline communities, not much can be found about names of Ghanaians in online communities. Exploring names of Ghanaians in online communities gives an insight into whether technology has influenced names and the naming practices of Ghanaians and also how technology has enhanced identity construction in computer mediated communication (CMC).

Background to the Study

The scientific study of personal names in society has received a considerable attention among scholars. These studies have generally investigated naming practices in offline communities, usually focusing on names of people who are from the same ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Agyekum (2006), Akinnaso (1981), Dakubu (2000) and Sekyi-Baidoo (2019)

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are pioneering studies of personal names and the naming practices of people like the Akans of Ghana, the Yorubas of Nigeria, the Dagombas of Ghana, and the Akans of Ghana respectively.

Three key thematic areas regarding the personal names and naming practices of the studied groups can be drawn from the above studies: the typology of names, socio-cultural factors influencing the choice of names and finally, the semantic and pragmatic functions of names. With regards to the typology of names, the studies reveal that there are various categories of names which exist or are made to exist, and the choice of one name or the other for an individual (usually a newly born baby) is influenced by sociolinguistic factors such as age, sex and socio-economic status of the child or the family into which the child has been born. The studies reveal that names of these groups are not arbitrary labels, but carry semantic content which gives an insight into the culture, including philosophy, environment, language, religion and thoughts of these people (Agyekum, 2006; Akinnaso, 1981; Dakubu, 2000; Sekyi-Baidoo, 2019). An analytical and theoretical perspective have evolved from these studies that the study of names reveals the identity of the named and the society–especially when naming practices of the society are studied (Ainiala, Saarelma, & Sjöblom, 2016; Sekyi-Baidoo, 2019).

In modern times, the advent of the internet has influenced almost every aspect of human life (Darko-Adjei, 2019; Dwivedi, Ismagilova, Hughes, Carlson, Filieri, Jacobson, & Wang, 2021; Ifigeneia & Dimitrios, 2018; Isbahi, 2019; Levin & Mamlok, 2021) and has resulted in the creation of social media networks (SMNs) giving rise to the formation of online communities (Alenezi, 2020), where offline community practices such as naming has been

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transported to (Busabaa, 2017; van der Nagel, 2017). Acceptance into the online community starts with a registration process where one is required, among other things, to select a username (Aleksiejuk, 2015; Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Kennedy, 2006; Qian & Scott, 2007; van der Nagel, 2017) to be used as address or reference terms (Aleksiejuk, 2015; Hagström, 2012) just as it is in offline communities where a new born must be named. Contrary to offline community practices, members of online communities select their names themselves. Because usernames are self-selected rather than bestowed on a person, such names are more likely to be a reflection of a person's true self (Gatson, 2011; Lindholm, 2013). As stated by Barton and Lee (2013), there is an associative meaning which is embedded in usernames such that they often signal some sense of the self. Some usernames are selected by individuals to foreground certain aspects of their imagined and second identity (Aleksiejuk, 2015; Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Del-teso-Craviotto, 2008; Hassa, 2012; Xu, Huang, Jiang, & Zou, 2020). The online naming practice seems to provide rich data for determining the identity of these individuals.

Scholarly research on username has generally been conducted from two perspectives: categorisation of the usernames and the study of usernames as a linguistic resource for identity construction on SMNs. Bechar-Israeli (1995), one of the earliest study of usernames, focused on the nicknames of people from varied socio-cultural backgrounds on internet relay chat (IRC). The study specifically sought to categorise the nicknames of people on this medium and how they used the names to construct and display their identities. Since this study, quite a number of studies (see Hassa, 2012; Olivier, 2014; Raátz, 2011; Van Langendonck, 2007; Xu, Huang, Jiang, & Zou, 2020) have

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attempted the investigation into the usernames of people in different social media networks (SMNs). For example, the usernames of Chinese on WeChat, a popular social media site in China, have been investigated (Xu, Huang, Jiang, & Zou, 2020). Other studies include an investigation into the usernames of Moroccans on Casa Chat (Hassa, 2012), the usernames of South Africans on Twitter (Olivier, 2014) and the usernames of Hungarians on *Törzsasztal* (Raátz, 2011).

In categorising usernames, different scholars appear to assign different classes of names (see classification of Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Hassa, 2012; Olivier, 2014; Raátz, 2011; Xu, Huang, Jiang, & Zou, 2020). This is not surprising since such studies were conducted on different SMNs, and some of these SMNs may have their rules regarding the choice of name an individual may select to represent them on the network (Evans et al., 2017; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014). More so, these studies mentioned above (except Bechar-Israeli, 1995) have been conducted within a particular geographical boundary paying attention to people from a particular nation-state with the same or similar linguistic characteristics. This may be a reason for the variations in the types of username in the studies and confirms earlier studies (see Hassa, 2012; Olivier, 2014; Raátz, 2011; Xu, Huang, Jiang, & Zou, 2020) on names that the naming practices are influenced by the people's culture. Notwithstanding, a summary of the categorisations of these usernames show that broadly, the types of these usernames are real names, nicknames or symbols such as emojis and diacritic signs.

Studies on usernames have also focused on usernames as a linguistic resource for identity construction. Usernames have been found to be one key

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resource people in online spaces use to write themselves into being. That is, usernames on SMNs are not arbitrary labels as some may suggest; usernames are linguistic resources which individuals may use to signal their identities (van der Nagel, 2017) and one social media network that gives people the affordance to construct their identities is WhatsApp.

WhatsApp is among the most popular SMNs in Ghana, and used by most university students (Afful & Akrong, 2020; Appiah, 2016; Segbenya, Nyagorme, & Appiah, 2020). However, onomastic research into social media has been slow to get off the ground. Barton and Lee (2013) outline ten reasons why SMNs should be of interest for socially oriented linguistics. Among these are four reasons which have, to a large extent, necessitated this study. First, Barton and Lee suggest that SMNs such as WhatsApp should be studied because the world is increasingly textually mediated and the web is an essential part of this textual mediation. Again, it is important for socially oriented linguist to study SMNs because linguistic resources are drawn upon to assert new identities and to represent the self in online spaces. Barton and Lee also opine that people combine semiotic resources in new ways and they invent new relations between language and other modes of meaning making, and finally, new methods for researching language are made possible when attention is given to the study of SMNs. All these suggestions have a bearing on why this study was undertaken.

As a result of its popularity among Ghanaian university students, WhatsApp is chosen as the social media network for this study. Using WhatsApp and the concepts of virtual community, symbolic interactionism, as well as theory on naming and identity, this study investigates the usernames of

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university students in Ghana, specifically, students in the University of Cape Coast (UCC), and the factors that influence their choice of usernames on WhatsApp, and also how they use their WhatsApp usernames to construct identities in the online space.

Statement of the Problem

In sub-Saharan Africa in general and Ghana in particular, research on naming practices on SMNs is almost non-existent as previous studies on usernames were largely situated outside sub-Saharan African culture, leaving the relatively high number of usernames of Africans unexamined though usernames constitute an important element of CMC and internet linguistic studies (Aleksiejuk, 2013). Studies of usernames offer insights about different dynamics of identity, and other socio-cultural characteristics trends in that society (Bechar-Israeli, 1995).

The significance of names in the Ghanaian culture cannot be overemphasized as names are seen as crucial element in Ghanaian culture. Studies on names in traditional offline Ghanaian communities (e.g. Adjah, 2011; Agyekum, 2006; Sekyi-Baidoo, 2019) which have looked at the naming practices and how names signal identity among some ethnic groups in Ghana corroborate this assertion and belief. Though these aforementioned studies on Ghanaian names have argued that names encapsulate ideals, ambitions, philosophy, aesthetic values, and ideological beliefs of Ghanaians, little is known about whether and how these conventions and perceptions are applicable to online social settings. Again, there are many online settings where names have not been adequately and scholarly scrutinised (Aleksiejuk, 2015). Among these social networking sites is WhatsApp. To fill this gap, this

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study focuses on the examination of usernames of Ghanaians on the aforementioned social media network.

Secondly, factors which inform the choice of usernames have not been given much attention to in studies on usernames (Xu, Huang, Jiang, & Zou, 2020). It is suggested that the reasons behind the choice of usernames must be investigated as studying names found in online environments, and exploring the motives behind the choice of a particular username give us information on the naming customs and habits and also helps us to understand how bearers of the usernames perceive themselves (Hagström, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

Primarily, the study seeks to demonstrate how Ghanaian university students make use of their usernames as a linguistic resource to construct and communicate their identities in the online social setting. This purpose will however be achieved by: (1) analysing the categories of usernames of Ghanaian university students on WhatsApp; (2) finding the factors that influence the choice of usernames of Ghanaian university students; and (3) examining the kinds of identity Ghanaian university students construct through their usernames on WhatsApp.

Research Questions

1. What are the categories of username of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?
2. What factors influence the choice of usernames of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?
3. What kinds of identity are constructed through the usernames of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?

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Motivation for the Study

As a regular user of SMNs, one of the things that has attracted my attention on SMNs is the kind of names that people use on these social media platforms and how these names play out in CMC. Two instances concerning usernames on SMNs provided the motivation for me to carry out this research.

To begin with, in one of my encounters on Twitter, a user had posted a picture of some street hawkers and had written under the picture, pleading with other people on Twitter that they should not bargain with these street hawkers because the street hawkers' job is "hand to mouth". A user, whose username was "Born Royal" then came to comment to suggest that these street hawkers should not be underrated because they are "the real owners of Accra". The user who posted the initial message then came to react to the message saying, "Your name says Born Royal. Am not surprised with your commentary! abeg carry your Royalty away you living in a castle with luxury all around you". Clearly, the username influenced this person to make such a rebuttal.

At another instance, in one of the WhatsApp groups I belonged to, mostly to discuss football issues, one of the members whose username was Steve Wonder, made a comment about a football game that was being played. Another member in the group came to react to the message by writing "Steve Wonder" and adding an emoji which suggested that the member with the username Steve Wonder was visually impaired just like the famous musician called Steve Wonder.

The comments made about these bearers of those usernames could be right or wrong. Notwithstanding, it was the bearers of those names who could

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actually give the reasons why they chose those usernames and the message they wanted to put out there through the choice of their usernames. This therefore motivated me to find out from the bearers of the usernames themselves the motives behind their choice of username and the message they wished to communicate to their audience in the online communities of which they belong to. It is my hope that this study will enlighten people on the significance of usernames in the online space.

Significance of the Study

The current study has relevance in some key areas. First, the study is relevant for the contribution to online onomastic research in sub-Saharan Africa in general, and Ghana in particular. A careful search in the literature reveals little to none research on the relationship between names and identity construction in the online space in the African context in general and in the Ghanaian context in particular. This study therefore serves as an empirical reference material for academics and other researchers as well as any person interested in electronic onomastic study.

Again, among Ghanaians, it appears that little to no attention is given to the significance of names people choose to represent themselves on SMNs such as WhatsApp though this activity is an important way of understanding an aspect of human behaviour in the context of naming practices in the online social settings. Even in cases where attention is given to the significance of such usernames, it appears that people may associate a wrong meaning to the username. The findings of this study therefore provide some basis for understanding how people creatively use names to create their identities on

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SMNs, and also inform the general public that names people use on SMNs are influenced by hidden factors best known to the bearers of such names.

Delimitations

The study considers only usernames of Ghanaian university students in the University of Cape Coast and therefore usernames of other nationalities did not form the focus of the study. My choice of usernames of Ghanaians stems from the fact that I am a Ghanaian, and I am motivated to unearth the contemporary trends of naming practices of Ghanaians on SMNs such as WhatsApp, and how Ghanaians use their usernames as a medium to construct identities in online communities. Again, my choice is informed by the dearth of studies on naming practices of Ghanaians on online communities especially studies that focus on how naming practices on online communities serve as a source of identity construction.

WhatsApp is the social media platform considered for the study. Other social media platforms did not form the focus of this study. The choice of WhatsApp stems from the fact that it ranks as the most used social media platforms by Ghanaians (Ceci, 2022). Arguably, many Ghanaian university students use WhatsApp for various activities on a daily basis. This allows me to gather enough corpus of usernames of Ghanaian university students and interact with them on factors that influence their choice of usernames and also the kinds of identity constructed through such usernames.

Definition of Terms

Username: Username is used to refer to any name or symbol such as emoji that has been used in the profile section on WhatsApp by participants as their names.

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Emoji: In this study, emoji is used to refer to any pictogram, logogram or ideogram or smiley which has been used by any participant as a username or in addition to a username.

Identity: In this work, identity is used to refer to the aspect of the self a participant makes conspicuous or inconspicuous through their usernames on WhatsApp.

Virtual community: In this work, virtual community refers to the aggregate of people found in the WhatsApp group used for this study.

Real name: In this study, real name is used to refer to any category of username on WhatsApp that is the legal and official or personal name of the participants.

Nickname: In this study, the term is used to refer to any category of username on WhatsApp that is not the legal or official name of the participants.

Organisation of the Study

The study is organised into five chapters. Chapter One of this study consists of the introduction, the background to the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, motivation for the study, significance of the study, delimitation of the study, definition of terms and organisation of the study. The primary focus of this chapter was to situate the study in a context in order to emphasise the need for the study. Chapter Two presents the related literature review about the study. Here, the concepts underpinning the study as well as the theoretical framework guiding the study are discussed. Also, empirical review of studies on usernames and identity construction on SMNs are presented. Chapter Three also describes the research methods used for the study. It comprises the research approach

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together with its design, population, sampling procedures, data collection instruments, procedures for data collection, and procedures for data analysis. Ethical issues are also discussed. Chapter Four presents the results and discussions. First, the categories of usernames are presented. This is followed by a presentation of factors that influence the choice of usernames, and the kinds of identity constructed through the usernames. Finally, Chapter Five presents the summary, conclusions and implications of the study as well as recommendations for further research.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented a brief introduction and a background to the study. This was done in order to situate the current study in a context and provide a direction for the study. The problem of the study, the research questions that guide the current study, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study and the delimitations of the study have also been presented in this chapter. The operational definitions of some terms used in this study, as well how this study is organised have been presented in this chapter. The next chapter presents the literature review.

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CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews literature relevant to the study. It discusses some important conceptual frameworks within which the study is situated. It also discusses the theoretical framework that guides the study. Finally, it reviews some empirical studies related to the current study.

Conceptual Framework

This section gives an overview of the concepts that underpin this study. These concepts include identity, virtual community, symbolic interactionism and presentation of self in everyday life. The concepts of username and its related concepts, as well as WhatsApp are also discussed. These concepts provide a firm ground on which the current study is situated. They also provide broader perspectives within which the present study is shaped.

Identity

The concept of identity has been one that has been difficult for scholars in every academic field to define and describe (Marwick, 2005) and has generated controversies among academics (De Fina, 2019), especially in recent times, and has been described to be something of an enigma (Fearon, 1999), ambiguous and slippery (Buckingham, 2008) and complex (Aldrin, 2011). Due to this, the term can be explained and used in many divergent ways. The concept of identity means different things to different people at different times (Gleason, 1983). However, one general denominator of most theoretical approaches to identity is the belief that identity is a complex concept (Hough & Izdebska, 2016). Its complexity implies that, there is still

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not a single generalised or standardised definition of the word (Aleksiejuk, 2015). The earliest recorded use of the term 'identity' appeared in 1570 as 'identitie' (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006) which means the quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness. Though this definition offers some form of basic and general understanding of the concept, it has however been challenged by many scholars because this definition has been viewed as narrow as it fails to capture social aspects such as nationality, ethnicity, groups or ancestry as components of an individual's identity (Fearon, 1999).

The treatment of the concept has moved from a self-fashioning, agentive, internal project of the self, through more recent understandings of social and collective identity, to postmodern accounts which treat identity as fluid, fragmentary, contingent and one which is constituted in discourse (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Kozinets, 2015). This means that the concept of identity in modern times is viewed as one which is dynamic and not static, fragmented, real or constructed, and even sometimes contradictory (Agunbiade, Obiyan, & Sogbaike, 2013; Aldrin, 2011; Darvin, 2016; Hough & Izdebska, 2016).

This study aligns with the socio-cultural linguistic approach to identity which was inspired by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). It is one of the postmodern approaches to identity, and it views identity as a person's process of making use of action, interaction as well as creating images of self in order to explore who they are or who they want to be in certain contexts of the world (Aldrin, 2011). Anytime language users speak or write, they actively engage in identity

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construction as they organise and re-organise a sense of who they are, who they wish to be and how they relate to and make sense the social world. According to Harzuah (2018), individuals who seek to define their identity do so by asserting their individuality, while at the same time, join with others to sustain their self-esteem and status. This is so because the significance of identity construction in society is to desire for recognition, affiliation, security and safety.

Aleksiejuk (2015) indicates that the concept of identity is a key feature which seems to be associated with names and that the study of names is significantly about the relationship between names and identity. This holds true for Hough and Izdebska (2016) as they also indicate that naming is always about assigning identity. It therefore follows that studying naming practices reveals the constructed, negotiated and the fluid character of social reality and of identity (Aleksiejuk, 2015). It is as a result of the foregoing that the concept of identity is crucial in the current study since the study seeks to find how names found on WhatsApp are used to reveal the constructed, negotiated and the fluid character of social reality and of identity.

Symbolic Interactionism (SI)

Symbolic interactionism owes its intellectual underpinnings to the likes of William James, John Dewey and Herbert Mead. Its sociological contributions, however, came through the works of Charles Horton Cooley, William Isaac and Thomas Blumer (Aksan et al, 2009; Stryker, 1972). The term "Symbolic Interaction" was actually coined by Blumer in 1937. Though originally a sociological paradigm, Fine (1993) notes that the theory's central premises have been adopted, adapted and incorporated into other traditions.

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Symbolic interactionism is based on how meanings emerge from the reciprocal interaction of people in a particular social environment (Aksan et al, 2009), and how these meanings and interactions help to create and maintain society (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Basically, SI focuses on micro level behaviours of humans and their characteristic of using complex and abstract symbols to communicate (Maines, 1997). These symbols expand meaning from the present and link discrete objects and events from different points in time to anticipate the future. Stryker (1972) outlines four basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism: 1. Man must be studied on his own level since his capacity for producing and storing complex symbols differentiates him from other living forms. As a result, SI seeks to interpret the subjective viewpoints of people and how those people make sense of their world from their unique perspective (Carter & Fuller, 2015); 2. The fruitful scientific way to understanding man's behaviour is to analyse society because a person is born into an ongoing society and a culture; 3. The human being is an actor as well as a reactor, and does not relate to the environment as a physical given but rather to that environment as it is symbolically mediated. It follows that men respond to symbolic environment and produce their own symbols. 4. Men are neither born social or anti-social but a-social, and can become either of the two through interacting with others. These assumptions unearth the symbiotic relationship between the self and the society. In symbolic interactionism, the individual is seen as agentic, autonomous and integral in creating their social world through the use of significant symbols in communicating with others (Carter & Fuller, 2015).

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Language is central to the theory of SI. Symbolic interactionists such as Mead found language as the sole element that connects the social process and organised society (Stryker, 1972). Language, to the symbolic interactionist, is a system of significant symbols whose meaning is shared by participants in social interaction, and that these symbols function in place of that which they symbolise (ibid).

One of the assumptions of SI, as noted earlier, is that the human is an actor, and as an actor, an individual may assign symbols to himself and may respond to himself by naming, defining and classifying himself. Doing this is to have a self, where one's self is how a person describes to himself his relationship to others in the social process. To Markus and Nurius (as cited in Kutor, 2017), a person's conception of himself or herself can be put into two categories. These are: (1) the now self, which expresses the self as it presently is perceived by the individual, and (2) the possible selves, which are images of the self that have not yet been realised but that are hoped for. Intertwined in self is the concept of identity. The self is conceived as comprising a set of discrete identities; what people wish and feel about themselves can be connected to the identities comprising the self.

The advancement in communication technology has led to the emergence of social media such as WhatsApp. This has redefined the concept of social interaction and how shared meaning occurs (Carter & Fuller, 2015), as CMC is gradually taking the place of traditional, face-to-face social interactions. WhatsApp provides a social context for an interaction between and among two or more individuals, though such social interactions may not be as exactly as those occurring in face-to-face interactions. However, there

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are symbolic cues which aid how meanings are constructed and negotiated in online social interactions as those occurring on WhatsApp. One of such symbolic cues in the username. SI sees the individual as an actor who may assign symbols to himself, and may respond to himself through naming. The human being is symbolic and uses linguistic symbols as the basis for creating and acting meaningfully in social interactions.

On WhatsApp, usernames serve as one of the symbols which a user assigns to himself or herself for creating and acting meaningfully in the course of his or her interactions with others. Thus, an individual who selects a username may induce thoughts, feelings and ideas in the people he or she interacts with on WhatsApp (Kutor, 2017). A username may describe oneself in his or her relationship with others and to others in the social process. Such username may come to represent aspects of the person's identities of which those identities may project the wishes and feelings of the bearer of the name.

It should be noted that usernames selected to represent people on WhatsApp are sometimes constructed in the course of offline social interactions. It follows that though SI was formulated to ascertain how meanings are constructed and negotiated in face-to-face interactions, same can be applied to the online setting since it is believed that people transport their offline social interaction characteristics to the online setting. This, according to Carter and Fuller (2015), should propel symbolic interactionists to focus on technological developments that assist in or take place off traditional, face-to-face interactions.

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Goffman's presentation of self in everyday life

The works of Erving Goffman were rooted in SI. His works created a widespread interest in interpretivism and symbolic interaction (Birnbaum, 2008). This makes him one of the most iconic symbolic interactionists of the classical era. Symbols, shared meanings and identity are the core symbolic interaction themes that run through the works of Goffman (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Goffman, 1959). In his seminal book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman introduced a variety of SI: Dramaturgy. In dramaturgy, Goffman uses a theatrical performance as a metaphor to describe how people (actors) present themselves to others (audience) in order to influence the audience's impressions about them. As actors, individuals translate their desires, feelings, beliefs and self-images into communicable form in the form of, for example, words (Birnbaum, 2008).

According to Goffman, in order to define the social interaction, people seek information about an individual who enters their presence. For these people, many sources of information become accessible and many sign-vehicles are available to convey the information (Goffman, 1959).

Goffman notes:

> They can rely on what the individual says about himself or on documentary evidence he provides as to who and what he is…Many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it. For example, the "true" or "real" attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior. (p. 2)

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To Goffman, the expressiveness of an individual and his capacity to give impressions involve two different kinds of sign activity: the expression an individual gives and the expression that the same gives off. While the former involves the verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are known to attach to these symbols, the latter involves the wide range of actions that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way (Goffman, 1959).

Goffman's concept of how people present themselves in everyday interaction focused on offline social interactions. However, his observations are still relevant in the face of modern technology, the internet and SMNs which have brought about online social interactions, as his observations provide insights into today's complex society where social interactions have transcended the offline spaces to online spaces where the concept of presentation of the self is still relevant and worthy of study.

WhatsApp enables people to engage in social interactions. People on WhatsApp can be described, in Goffman's terms, as actors who rely on many sources of information and many sign-vehicles available to convey information about themselves. One of such sign-vehicles is the username through which an expression may be given or through which an expression is given off. As an expression given, the username conveys information that the bearer of the username and his audience may have knowledge of whereas as expression given off, the username may involve the wide range of actions that

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others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, in this case, the bearer of the username.

Username is a symbol through which people (actors) present themselves to others (audience) in order to influence the audience's impressions about them. Bays 1998 (as cited in Aleksiejuk, 2015) notes that usernames substitute the role of "face" in Goffman's notion of face. It is one of the symbols through which actors translate their desires, feelings, beliefs and self-images into communicable form.

The Virtual Community (VC)

The advent of the internet and its commercialisation in the 1990s gave rise to the emergence of some terms and concepts associated with this technology. One of such concepts is virtual communities (VC) as coined by Howard Rheingold in his book *The Virtual Community* in 1993. Other terms synonymously used are online communities and digital community (Agostini & Merchant, 2019; Hassa, 2012) and cyber-communities. Different definitions of VC exist in the literature. While some are rigid, others are flexible. For the purpose of this study, the definition offered by Klang and Olsson (1999) is adopted because of their stress on the social aspect included in the concept. They aptly define virtual community as a social entity where people relate to one another by the use of technology. The term was used to describe the aggregate of people who have formed social relationships through modern technology such as the computer, and which relationships transcend any known geographical boundaries.

A considerable debate has surrounded the "communitiness" of virtual communities and questions have been asked if virtual communities are indeed

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the electronic version of real communities which are largely defined in terms of defined geographical boundaries, and its mode of interaction which is face-to-face (Baym, 2002; Ellis, Oldridge, & Vasconcelos, 2004; Parks, 2011). With the advent of virtual communities, distance and time seem to lose any relevance (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014; Van Dijk, 2005). Hollingshead and Contractor (2006) are of the opinion that the traditional notion of groups, in this context communities, has changed, in view of the modern developments in digital technologies which have birthed a new kind of community which is virtual. They ween that in the twenty-first century, members of VCs need not to be formally constituted or be co-present with regards to time and space in order to collaborate, disseminate information or even socialise as these new technologies facilitate the formation, perpetuation and disbandment of communities among individuals who use different devices such as mobile phones and laptops on forums such as internet newsgroups and on online chatrooms.

Rheingold (1993) recounts his experiences on a VC named Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL), a leading online bulletin board systems in his time, and which he referred to as a new kind of social habitation. He brings to the fore the emerging communal relations where people use words on computer screens to engage in the full range of social activities. Rheingold states that:

> People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play

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> games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot if idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life. (p.1)

He however notes the point of departure, which is that, in virtual communities, we leave our bodies behind.

Though different, virtual communities are not largely different from traditional communities as the two share a great deal of similarities. As stated by Stolterman, Croon and Argren (2000), VCs may be virtual in some sense, however, they are not outside traditional communities but rather form true parts of the traditional communities. Guzzeti (2008) and Gündüz (2017) state that there is a close interrelatedness between VC and the traditional community in that the former originated from the latter and eventually returns to it. Jurova (2017) adds that traditional communities may consist of people who are geographically bound and may be of the same religion, race or culture, members of virtual communities may be of different race, culture or religion, however, they are united by common interests, ideas and beliefs.

The concept VC is relevant to the present study for two reasons. First, like any traditional community, VC has over the years, since its emergence, demonstrated to exist as a social entity with norms, culture, and traditions which have led to some discursive practices. One of these include naming practices. One significant aspect which researchers who have talked about Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* have relegated to the background is the naming practices which existed on WELLs. Rheingold hints of the naming practices on the WELLs. He stated that one of the most important social rule which every member was to oblige to was that no member was to be

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anonymous and as a result, members were to use their real names as their usernames under their postings.

Second, the concept is relevant to this present study because VCs serve as platforms where individuals explore their identities (Barton & Lee, 2013; Baym, 2002; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Kennedy, 2006; Rheingold, 1993). As posited by Scheidt (2001), in today's media-saturated world, identities are no longer built solely within the close-knit communities of family, neighbourhood, school, and work but online environments are part of our world today and therefore play an important role in the formulations of our identities or constructions of self. Language takes an enhanced role as a result of the limited non-verbal cues on VCs (Baym, 2002) and as a result, there is much room for people to construct and perform different features of identities primarily through linguistic means (Barton & Lee, 2013). One of such linguistic items is the usernames (Cornetto & Nowak 2006; Shafie, Nayan, & Osman, 2012; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004) members in VCs choose to represent their absent bodies.

WhatsApp

Social networking services have transcended and advanced beyond SMNs such as Twitter and Facebook. One of the most buzzed about SMNs is mobile instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp (Faklaris & Hook, 2016). WhatsApp is an instant messaging application that can be downloaded and installed on smartphones to offer both synchronous and asynchronous communication (Segbenya, Nyagorme, & Appiah, 2020) between and among people in the online space. It allows its users to send or receive messages in the forms of location information, audio, video, and text messages (Ahad &

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Lim, 2014; Al-Smadi, 2017; Church & de Oliveira, 2013). It allows users to also make or receive audio and video calls to or from one's contacts who may be friends, family or even acquaintances. WhatsApp is one of the fast growing online platforms, and its use is very popular in the world today. The popularity of WhatsApp and the increasing number of users is one that cannot be underemphasized. Gora and Muchenje (2020) indicate that WhatsApp has expanded and taken in a large volume of users from all spheres of life, ranging from high school and university students, the rural to the urban, professionals and anyone who has internet connectivity access. Statistics show that worldwide, there are approximately 2.44 billion active users of WhatsApp, and it is ranked as the most used mobile instant messaging app (Ceci, 2022; Ruby, 2022). As a result of its popularity, WhatsApp is playing a major role in the academic circle as staff and students, especially university students all over the world have adopted its use for various purposes (Afful & Akrong, 2020; Baishya & Maheshwari, 2020; Gasaymeh, 2017; Segbenya, Nyagorme, & Appiah, 2020). It has been observed that this mobile application provides an environment for individuals such as students to actualise their identities (Kutor, 2017).

WhatsApp as a virtual community and a place for identity construction

Originally, WhatsApp was to provide a simple communication between people who have each other's contact. However, the application currently provides the opportunity for its users to create groups of community with the maximum number of 512 people as at 2022. Many people, ranging from family, students, and workers among others have formed a second community in the online space which is a group of people who are linked by

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some commonality or shared interests (Marwick, 2005) on WhatsApp. It is interesting to note that members in the online community may constitute people who might not have even met in the traditional offline community but may share ties which may even be stronger than some in the offline community (Gatson, 2011; Ozimska, 2019; Rheingold, 1993). This feature of WhatsApp makes it amenable to fostering belongingness and sociability (Ahad & Lim, 2014; Al-Smadi, 2017) and gives rise to strong online communities. This means that users of WhatsApp adopt and interact on this social media network to, among other things, engage in identity construction and presentation (Agunbiade, Obiyan, & Sogbaike, 2013) just like in the offline communities. That is, WhatsApp is a space where emergent selves are worked out and experimented (Baulch, Matamoros-Fernandez, & Johns, 2020). This holds true because the application provides resources for its users to do so.

There are at least four major resources readily available to a WhatsApp user to engage in identity construction with. These resources are the profile photo section, the about section, the twenty-four hour status section and the username section. Before the introduction of the twenty-four hour status feature, the about section was one of the major resources on WhatsApp that people used to engage in identity construction as this enables users to write something about themselves or write about just anything they wish to communicate to their contacts. People use this resource to, for example, give a brief description of themselves, write bible verses or quaran verses, and use it to advertise their products, show their political affiliations and campaigns, among others (Kutor, 2017). This information could be kept there for as long

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as the user wanted. The profile photo section also enables users to update a photo that can be kept for as long as the person wanted. Some updated pictures of themselves, of family members, of friends or with friends or pictures of anything they wished to bring to the notice of their contacts. Users also posted pictures which showed their religious affiliations, philosophy, love for a particular sports event, or pictures of their favourite sports athletes, musicians, actors and many others.

Currently, there is also a twenty-four hour status feature that users can utilise to write just anything, post videos and pictures which may signal their identities. However, any information updated through the status feature vanishes after 24 hours. Users of WhatsApp utilise this feature just in the same way as they did for the about section. Users of WhatsApp utilise this resource to engage in religious, political, social, moral, cultural, and educational discourses among others by writing for example, bible and quaran verses, trending political and educational issues. This resource also allows users of WhatsApp to post images of themselves, family, friends, and images that depict their socio-cultural or political ideologies or philosophies. All these activities, to a very large extent, signal the construction of identities of the users.

Another resource that enables users to engage in identity construction is the username. In the next section, I discuss username as a linguistic resource for identity construction on WhatsApp.

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Username as a linguistic/semiotic resource for identity construction on WhatsApp

In the era of growing computer mediated communication and the plethora of SMNs that spring up each moment, the concept of username is one that cannot simply be pushed under the carpet, especially among scholars in the field of socio-onomastics due to the significant role that usernames are playing in the online spaces. Xu, Huang, Jiang and Zou (2020) describe username as "a self-assigned nickname or pseudonym used in a particular online milieu predominated by closed communications between offline acquaintances" (p.3). Crocker (2018) also defines usernames as "the names that belong to and identify owners of online accounts" (p. 1). Usernames are a class of onomastic category, precisely, anthroponyms that are used in online communities to represent people in the online world. It must however be emphasised that not all usernames may be anthroponyms since some usernames on SMNs these days may belong to businesses, companies and other organisations (Crocker, 2018; Olivier, 2014). Terms like screen names (Gatson, 2011; Tynes, Reynolds, & Greenfield, 2004) internet nicknames (Bechar-Israeli, 1995) and internet chat names (Van Langendonck, 2007) have been used synonymously with usernames. However, Aleksiejuk, (2015) takes particular exception to the use of such terms as internet nicknames and internet chat names as she argues that these terms are misleading as they appear to suggest a narrow group of names used in the online space. This is apt because using the term nicknames or internet chat names to refer to names in online spaces seems to suggest that all names found in such places are nicknames or names used only in chat rooms, which is problematic since not all such names

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may be nicknames or names used only in chat rooms on the internet. She therefore proposes the term "username" be used since it encapsulates all classes of names be it nicknames, pseudonyms or even official names in the online space. Usernames play a crucial role in the online communities in the sense that they tend to serve as a means of identification on online communities and also function as a term of reference and address (Aleksiejuk, 2015). This means that in the online community, if any member wants to make reference to another or address such person, especially in cases where members do not know each other from the offline community, the person will use the member's username to address and refer to them. This makes usernames one of the most important elements in the online space. It is even more important because without a username, one may not be able to sign up for an account on any social network application.

The first form of usernames on digitally networked communication, according to van der Nagel (2017), were numbers which were unique identification codes that distinguished between users of the same computer—due to the rarity of computers, people had to share. Only big companies, governments and universities had access to the use of computers. After logging into a computer system, people had to choose a username that would represent them to others.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, early email addresses were from institutional accounts and were therefore generated by the institution and contained only one's full names, in this case, one's official names. However, a gradual shift that occurred in online communication in the mid-1990s meant

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that email service providers such as Compu-Serve or America Online could allow people to create personal email addresses at a fee (van der Nagel, 2017).

According to van der Nagel (2017), further shifts and developments again made it possible for email service providers Hotmail and Yahoo to provide free email address to people. Because such email addresses were not affiliated with any institution, people created email addresses with usernames "laden with meaning, as people played with numbers, nicknames, interests, in-jokes and cultural references" (p. 5). With the advent of bulletin boards, online forums, chat rooms and social network sites, username is still relevant as these online platforms require a user to sign in with a username before accessing the platform. Though differences exist in the type of usernames that one can create to be used on the various platforms as there are rules regarding the naming practices on each platform (Aleksiejuk, 2015; Ozimska, 2019), van der Nagel notes that be it on bulletin boards or social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter, people creatively create usernames which may signal their identities in the online space.

Just like on other SMNs like Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram, one of the foremost and non-negotiable activities a user must perform after downloading WhatsApp is to select a username that will represent them on the platform (van der Nagel, 2017). Usernames selected can be changed at any time the person so wishes even if it had only been a second choosing the username. Cornetto and Nowak (2006) suggest that the selection of a username is not an arbitrary process but rather an activity that may be part of the user's self presentation strategies. This follows that the path to self-presentation on the online space starts with the selection of a username

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(Ozimska, 2019). Cornetto and Nowak further state that choosing a username may be as important as establishing one's self and also creating an impression about one's identity to others in the online space. In Goffman's terms, the username is utilised as a tool for self presentation and impression management (Goffman, 1959). In the online space, because usernames are self-selected rather than chosen for the individual, such names are most likely to be a reflection of the a person's true self (Gatson, 2011) or even, an extension of one's self (Barnes, 2003). These assertions show that usernames are a key linguistic vehicle through which the identities of people can be expressed in the online space. Sidorova 2006 (as cited in Aleksiejuk, 2015) explains that usernames are the beginning and the kernel for linguistic identity on the internet. Onomastic scholars in general and socio-onomastic scholars in particular have found a strong relationship between usernames and identity construction in online spaces. It has been found that people utilise the vehicle of usernames to showcase their ethnicity, nationality, sex, religion, profession, and family, among others (Aleksiejuk, 2015; Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2008; Gatson, 2011; Hassa, 2012; Tynes, Reynolds, & Greenfield, 2004; Xu, Huang, Jiang, & Zou, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Socio-onomastic research has always had a place for the relationship between names and identity. It is assumed that names and identity are closely linked. Since one of the core objectives of this study is to explore the names and their associations with identity, it is imperative to make use of a theory that helps in achieving this objective. As a result, the theory of naming and

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identity (NI) is relevant for this study. The next subsection discusses NI theory and why it is befitting for this study.

Naming and Identity Theory (NIT)

Naming and identity theory is a relatively new theory propounded by Emilia Aldrin in 2011. The theory takes inspiration from the combination of socio-cultural and linguistic perspectives to identity with focus on naming and identity. Its approach to the concept of identity is based on the assumption that identity is a person's process of making use of action, interaction and creation of images of self and others to enable them explore who they are or what they want to become in a certain context of the world. The theory is of the view that identity is flexible, rather than a fixed and a stable process, and that identity of a person is constantly changing throughout their life, and through different contexts and also potentially within the same context. The theory, again, is of the view that an individual may act out several identities which are different, and may do so simultaneously. It is an assumption of this theory that an individual's identity is never completed, and as such, identity cannot be observed or analysed as a whole. The theory therefore suggests an approach to the study of identity where fragmented identities which are put forward and made significant in certain context be studied.

The theory partitions the concept of identity as existing simultaneously on three levels namely: micro, local and macro. The theory stipulates that on a micro level, an individual creates a small scale and fluid identity that only lasts during a particular interaction. On the other hand, individuals create more prolonged identities that may last not only during an entire interaction but also during different interactions. On the macro level, it is the assumption of this

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theory that individuals create identities that are more prolonged and that identities created on this level can be relevant in several interactions as well as within different fields.

The theory's approach to identity sees identity creation as being made up of several individual acts called social positionings which are made when tangible resources which may be linguistic resources are used, that in some way position individuals socially through the creation of stances, attitudes or affiliations. The linguistic resources which may be used can be the choice of names which may index a certain social positioning. According to this theory, taking on a certain social position means seeing the world from a particular viewpoint.

The theory aligns with the tenet of the socio-cultural linguistic view of identity that identity is something which is actively constructed rather than something which exists a priori and therefore, identity must be studied through actions such as the act of naming. The theory views personal naming as a setting for the creation and negotiation of social meaning and identity. It states that names which are chosen are, and can become iconic with social attributes, values and groups. This means that when one chooses a name, it is an implication that the person has chosen which social attributes, values and groups the person wishes to be associated with and which ones the person wishes to be disassociated from.

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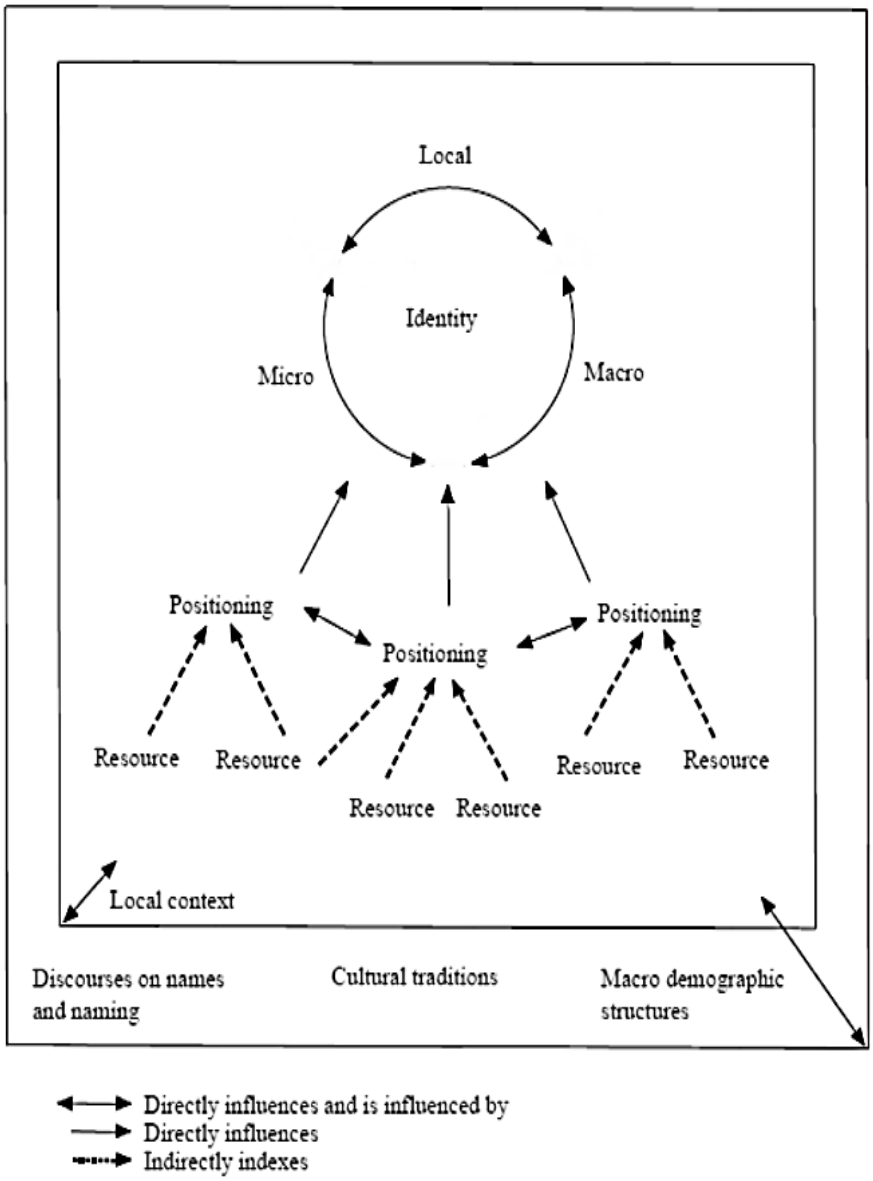

Figure 1: An overview of naming and identity theory (Aldrin, 2011)

The concept of identity, together with the three levels of identity are located at the top of the diagram. The two-way arrows imply that these levels of identity all influence one another. The circular forms indicate that the concept of identity is flexible rather than a fixed result. The diagram illustrates how identity is constructed through several social positionings. In positioning oneself, an individual uses some sort of tangible resources, and in the case of naming, these resources may be name criteria, name type, individual names or name spelling. The use of these resources may potentially socially position the

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individual. This relationship is however not simple and direct. It is rather indexical and indirect, hence indicated by the dashed arrows in the diagram. The theory sees identity as always embedded in a certain context, which is indicated by the frames in the diagram. The context, will always have an impact on how identities are created and which kinds of identity are created.

This theory is selected for this study because first of all, it aligns with the notion of identity that identity is never a fixed thing but rather flexible and is also subject to change throughout a person's life which is the stance taken in this present study. The study sees identity not as something which is a priori but rather carefully created and displayed through the choice of usernames in different VCs environment.

Again, the choice of this theory for the present study stems from the fact that the theory views onomastic category, in this sense, usernames as closely intertwined with identity. It therefore helps me to find out the kinds of identity that Ghanaians on WhatsApp construct and display to other people in the online space.

Empirical studies on identity construction on online social media networks

Identity construction and the presentation of the self in the online space are thematic issues that are gaining the attention of socio-onomasticians, sociolinguists, and discourse analysts in recent times. As a result, several studies have been conducted by scholars, to ascertain how people construct their identities and present themselves in the online space. These studies have provided theoretical insights into how identity is constructed in the online space especially, on SMNs, and provided the bedrock for further studies to be

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conducted in this regard. This section therefore presents some studies which have been conducted to reveal how identities are constructed by people on SMNs.

Kutor (2017) did a study on identity construction of undergraduate students from a Ghanaian university by analysing their display pictures (DPs) on WhatsApp. The findings from the study showed that the participants constructed and displayed their religious, self and personal interest, family, business, friendship and relationship, institutional/socio-academic group affiliation identities through their DPs.

Assaggaf (2019) conducted a discursive and pragmatic analysis of 846 text-based WhatsApp status notifications. The main aim of the study was to explore the discursive realisations of the status notifications and identify the major pragmatic themes conveyed by the users through the status notifications. Four themes were culled from the status notifications at the end of the analysis. These were national, religious, social and personal. It can be concluded from Assaggaf's study that users employed their WhatsApp status notifications to highlight their national, religious, social and personal identities to their audience on WhatsApp.

Jakaza (2020), using the appraisal theory and social constructionism theory, investigated the identity construction and or obfuscation on two social media network sites—one being WhatsApp. Subjecting WhatsApp statuses and profiles to a multimodal analysis, Jakaza's study showed that people constructed and communicated their identities to their audience. For instance, the study showed that through the WhatsApp statuses, people showed their national, political, affluent lifestyle and religious identities. However, Jakaza's

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study concluded that these identities were more of obfuscated rather than showing the real and stable identities of the status owners. A claim the study could not substantiate because investigations were not carried out to compare the online identities of the people to their offline identities. Other studies (Marwick, 2005) argue in the same vein that online identities constructed by *netizens* may not be stable and may not reflect the true identities thereof. To some extent this may be true, nonetheless, other studies (Lindholm, 2013) have also demonstrated that identities constructed in online platforms may show a true reflection of the person's offline identities.

Gora and Muchenje (2020) set out to investigate the relationship between language and gender on WhatsApp. They analysed the profiles and statuses of 100 Zimbabwean WhatsApp users. Though the objective of the study was not to ascertain how identity was constructed by the users, one of the findings from the analysis of the study showed that both men and women employed their profiles and statuses as medium to construct their identities to their audience. Aside the profile and statuses, the study also revealed that the participants constructed and displayed their identities through the choice of usernames they used on their WhatsApp.

Mangeya and Ngoshi (2021) investigated the construction of black Zimbabwean identities by analysing the multimodal WhatsApp statuses posted by Zimbabweans on their WhatsApp platform. The purpose of the study was to explore and interrogate how WhatsApp status updates posted by Zimbabweans inspired identity discourses and perpetuated unequal racial relations rooted in colonialism and its legacies. The findings from the study revealed that the WhatsApp status updates reinforced colonially constructed

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images of inferior black self-identity and the binary of white rationality versus black people's irrationality as the contents of the statuses showed the dominance of white privilege and superiority while the reverse projected a negative identity of the blacks. The study further showed that WhatsApp, as a public space, served as a platform for the projection and the perpetuation of negative black identities.

The foregoing studies show that many people utilise the various existing SMNs to engage in identity construction and presentation. The findings from these studies also provide stronger evidence that many resources are available for users of SMNs to engage in identity construction and presentation. The above studies share a strong relationship with my study because they all focused on identity construction on WhatsApp and therefore help put my study in perspective regarding how people construct and present themselves in the online space. The point of divergence is that my study focuses exclusively on how people use their usernames to construct their identities on WhatsApp.

Empirical studies on username categorisation and identity construction on social media networks

The advent of the commercialisation of the internet in the early 1990s has led to the formation of online communities which transcend spatio-temporal boundaries. Such online communities have been akin to those that exist offline (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1996) and have attracted the attention of scholars to study them in their own right. One of the major issues that have drawn scholastic attention is how identity is constructed in these online communities. Specifically, such scholars have investigated the categories of

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names that people use online and how these names serve as linguistic resource for identity construction on online communities. Such studies give a broader picture of the state of affairs regarding the categories of names and the use of online names as resource for identity construction. They also provide theoretical insights into the naming practices of people in online environments and also show how names used in such environments are used to communicate aspects of one's self to others, which is the focus of this current study. This section therefore provides a review of some studies which have been conducted in relation to the topic under discussion. Some of the studies are Bechar-Israeli (1995), Hassa (2012), Xu, Huang, Jiang and Zou (2020) and others.

Bechar-Israeli (1995) is a seminal study on the kinds of name used in an online community and how these names served as identity construction resource. Bechar-Israeli examined 260 names of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) users from around the globe, many of whom were from Europe, United States of America and Israel. The analysis of the data showed that of the 260 names used in the study, only 18 were real names whereas the remaining names were those which were creatively constructed by the users themselves. These names, Bechar-Israeli refers to as nicknames. However, there were sub-categories of the nickname category of IRC names. These nicknames, according to the study, were significant in that, they encapsulated participants' physical appearance, character traits, psychological or physiological state, profession or hobbies, age, affiliation with other place, and figures in literature and films, famous people, favourite cars, sexualised objects, flora and fauna, relationship with others, and technology.

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In a separate analysis of Israeli nicknames, Bechar-Israeli found that though Israelis on the chat room projected their identities through the choice of their nicknames, these identities were more related to self than identities reflecting the nation of Israel, ethnic Jewish and Hebrew cultures. Bechar-Israeli concluded the study on the note that nicknames remained important to the people in IRC since they served as the channel through which they created and communicated their internet identities and even transported their real life identities to the online space.

This study provided the foundation for further research to be conducted in this regard, with many researchers making this study a point of reference. However, it must be noted that the study, to some extent, was fraught with some analytical and methodological shortcomings. The analysis of the names into their categories and the semantic underpinnings of such names were largely based on the researcher's impressions. It is possible that the researcher might have missed the true meanings as contained in the names used in the analysis of the study. Again, the population used for the study was highly heterogeneous as the participants used for the study hailed from different nation-states. Though IRC is conceptualised as a community with its own practices in terms of naming, the influence of offline naming practices on the online naming practices cannot be overlooked. This does not allow for some form of generalisations to be made about the population. It is against this background that this current study gains strength. This study is similar to my study in that, Bechar-Israeli studied names on an online community. My study also focuses on names on WhatsApp. The difference however lies in the fact that while Bechar-Israeli used participants from different nation-states, my

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study makes use of participants from one nation-state—Ghana. Again, while Bechar-Israeli's study focused on names of people in an IRC, which was popular in that era, my study focuses on names of people on WhatsApp, a social media network which is popular in this era. Again, while Bechar-Israeli's made use of impressionistic approach to analyse the data in terms of their semantic connotations, in my study, the participants themselves were asked for the meanings of their usernames and the factors that influenced their choice of the usernames.

Hassa (2012) investigated the characteristics of 141 usernames of Moroccans from the city of Casablanca in an IRC room called Casa Chat. Hassa's categorisation of the usernames can broadly be put into two: Real names and nicknames. However, each category has sub-categories reflecting different aspects of life of the bearers of the names. Hassa's finding from the study showed that usernames were creatively constructed to reveal and project many aspects of the individual's identities. The usernames gave clues about the person's sex, age, physical appearance, the psychological state, expression of romance, religion, city, region or country. Not only did the usernames reflect the local identities of the individuals but also globalised identities. Hassa noted that some of the usernames reflected French, Spanish and English cultures. This, Hassa attributes to the historical colonial ties Morocco had with France and Spain, as well as the geographical proximity of Morocco and Spain. Hassa concluded the study by noting that usernames constitute a complex naming practice that acts as a barometer for identity construction, projection and mutation reflecting political, economic and socio-cultural impacts and shifts, and as a result, Moroccans in the online world used their

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usernames to enable them to reaffirm, value and project their shared local Moroccan, Arab and Muslim cultures and values, and at the same time, to indicate globalisation through constructing foreign identities.

Hassa's study is quite significant in the sense that though the study makes use of relatively small sample size when compared with the perceived number of Moroccans who may be on the IRC, because participants used share common characteristics as people from one nation-state and as people with similar cultural characteristics, especially relating to their naming practices, the findings from the study gives an overview of naming practices of Moroccans on that particular IRC. However, like in Bechar-Israeli's study, Hassa's analysis of the usernames were heavily based on the researcher's impressions. This might have prevented deeper underpinnings of the meanings of the names thereby not giving a deeper knowledge of such usernames.

Though the findings of Hassa's study are similar to those in Bechar-Israeli in that both studies provide evidence that names are used to construct and project the identities of participants, they depart in terms of the kinds of identity constructed and projected by the participants. In Bechar-Israeli study, few nicknames denoted collective identities; the case is different in Hassa's study as many people's usernames reflected collective identities. This is interesting because Bechar-Israeli's participants were from varied nations and communicated with people who are also from different nations, and it was expected that they project their collective identities. On the other hand, Hassa's study used participants who are from one nation and was expected that they would project more individual identities than collective ones.

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Unlike in Bechar-Israeli's study, Hassa's study took into consideration the significance of the use of real names of the participants. According to the study, such names serve a functional purpose in that they are used to reinforce relationships and interaction in chatrooms. Though the use of real names such as first names and surnames may not explicitly be used by participants to project an identity in an online environment, they sometimes give clues about the person's sex, ethnic and religious identities. It follows that the study of names in online environments must take cognisance of the relevance of the use of real names and not be relegated to the background as has been the case in studies of names in online environments. It is in this regard that I consider the relevance of participant's use of real names on WhatsApp in this study.

In an attempt to ascertain the veracity of how names encapsulate the ideals, ambitions, aesthetic values and ideological beliefs of Chinese people and how this is applicable in the online world, Xu, Huang, Jiang and Zou (2020) conducted an exploratory online survey and gathered 501 usernames of Chinese nationals in a popular SMN called WeChat. Just like in the earlier mentioned studies, this study showed that usernames can broadly be put into the categories of real names and self-selected names. These categories however occurred with some levels of variations and as a result, were put into sub-categories. The finding of the study also showed that usernames served as a semiotic resource which participants consciously create to negotiate their identities though the technology of online environments has evolved to include other resources through which people can use to project their identities. This confirms Bechar-Israeli's observation that names on online environments will continue to be relevant though the technology may transform Bechar-Israeli

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(1995). The study detailed that the Chinese on this platform couched names which communicated to their audience the complexity of their cultural identities. For example, some of the selected usernames reflected personal wishes of the participants and also reflected the ideals of Chinese poetry, classics and philosophy.

A study by Gatson (2011) also showed that username is one of the linguistic resources through which the physical selves are presented online. As a participant observer in an online community called *The Bronze*, and adopting both traditional ethnographic methods and conducting online surveys, Gatson analysed the usernames of members of the community. Her findings revealed that participants' usernames showed their identity relating to age, gender, geographical location, race, offline relationships and profession. According to her findings, the use of gendered usernames was the most common naming practice on *The Bronze*. Gendered given names such as Jennifer and Johnny were used. Again, other fanciful names which had a blend of a given name, such as Contessa Beth and LadyJack were also used. Gendered self-invented names without a given name incorporated, such as Safarigirl, BrownEyedGirl, Lady of Buffdom, Destructo Girl, Fangboy, Prince of Lunacy, and gin soaked boy were also used as usernames by the members of *The Bronze* community. Gatson's study share a similarity with my current study because both studies use an ethnographic approach to unearth the identities constructed through participants' usernames. Notwithstanding, the studies vary in the sense that while my study considered that factors influencing the choice of usernames of participants' usernames, Gatson's did not.

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Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008) set out to investigate the linguistic practices which aid participants in online dating chats become authentic gendered and sexual beings in the online world. Del-Teso-Craviotto's study which focused on English and Spanish speaking chatrooms (with participants mainly from the United States of America and Spain) revealed that username was one of the key linguistic items which helps authentication of participants. First and foremost, participants in dating chatrooms required a username which comes to represent the person or the personality of the one posting the message. The study revealed that usernames played a salient role in determining identities such as gender, nationality, age, physical appearance, sexuality, and location of chat participants. It was revealed that usernames indexed the participant's online gender by including semantically gendered nouns such as MALE4SALE30, mermaid 1 and LVNVCowboy. Not only did participants' usernames reveal their identity regarding their bodies but also adopted animal bodies or presented themselves as objects which to a large extent showed their gender and sexual identities.

This study is also significant in that it provides knowledge on the identities put forward in dating chatrooms through the choice of usernames, and has a relationship with my study in that both studies focus on how usernames are used as linguistic resource to construct and project identities in online environment. However, while Del-Teso-Craviotto's study focuses on names used in dating chatroom, my study focuses on names used by Ghanaian university students on WhatsApp.

Conducting a study on adolescence, race and ethnicity on the internet, Tynes, Reynolds and Greenfield (2004) found out that adolescents identified

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themselves racially through their usernames which were descriptive. The study revealed that participants' usernames made explicit reference to their race. An example of such names included CrazyLatinaGirl. Usernames also indexed race of participants through the description of participant's physical features which included hair colour and skin tone. Closely attached to the racial identity of the usernames was the gender identity of participants as users also selected usernames which reflected their gender.

Subrahmanyam, Greenfield and Tynes (2004) conducted a study on how adolescents marked gender and sexuality on an online teen chat room. Among other things, their findings revealed the use of usernames as the initial and primary medium marker of their gender. Out of the 46 usernames analysed, 10 were coded as connoting masculine identity whereas 16 were coded as connoting feminine identity. The remaining names were ambiguous in the sense that they were not gendered names. The study further showed that not only did the names reveal the gender and sexuality identities, some names, were more like statements that bearers of the names wished to convey about themselves or something they aspired to be. They concluded that usernames served as a medium through which participants exchanged information such as their gender and sexuality and also showed their special interests such as music and sports.

The studies by Subrahmanyam, Greenfield and Tynes (2004) and Tynes, Reynolds and Greenfield (2004) provide insights into how online identities are constructed through the choice of usernames by adolescents. These studies are significant study in that, they provide a support for

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relationships to be drawn since most of the participants used in my study fall within the late adolescent age group. .

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a review of literature relevant to the study. The review of the relevant literature indicates that evidence exists to support the assertion that there is a close relationship between the names people use on the various SMNs and identity construction and display. The empirical evidence shows that studies in this area have been conducted typically from the researchers' point of view, relying on their impressions to analyse data. However, my study allows participants to speak for themselves regarding how they use names in the online milieu. This approach offers more objectivity in the analysis of the data. Key conceptual terms such as virtual community, identity, WhatsApp, and usernames are also discussed with the aim of providing the conceptual terrain of my research study. The theoretical framework, naming and identity theory, which underpins study was discussed. The chapter also presented a review of the empirical studies relevant to this study. In the next chapter, I present a discussion on the research approach, the research design, as well as the methodological choices that were made in the collection and analysis of the data used in this study.

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CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

The main focus of the study was to identify how WhatsApp usernames are used by Ghanaian university students to construct their identities on WhatsApp. The previous chapter therefore was dedicated to the review of literature relevant to the study. Specifically, it presented an overview of the key concepts and theoretical framework as well as a review of empirical studies underlying this study. This current chapter presents the methodological procedures used by the researcher to handle the data before analysis. This is necessary because it equips readers with the necessary understanding of how data was handled in order to appreciate the findings of the study. The chapter specifically describes the research approach and the research design underlying the study. Data collection procedures and data analysis procedures are also enumerated.

Research Approach

The study was situated within the qualitative research approach. Basically, qualitative research involves discovery (Harwell, 2011; Willams, 2007). A discovery about the understanding of people's interpretation of their experiences (Creswell 2014; Creswell, 2013) which is possible through an interaction with those who live the experiences, and observing them behave or act within their context. The chief objective of qualitative research is to have an understanding of how people make sense of their lives and describe how they interpret their experiences (Hine, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Meaning, therefore, is very central in qualitative studies.

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The view expressed by Merriam and Tisdell is in tandem with the overall objective of this study as the interest of the researcher is to, through observation and interviews, have an in-depth understanding of the identities constructed by Ghanaian university students, specifically students in UCC through their WhatsApp usernames.

The qualitative research approach offers different designs to carrying out a qualitative study; as a result, the current research employed the netnographic research design. In the section that follows, a discussion on this design is presented.

Netnography as a Qualitative Method of Inquiry

The term netnography is a blend of the clipped words "net" from internet and "nography" from ethnography. The term was coined by Kozinets (2010). Other synonymous terms are virtual ethnography (Angelone, 2019; Hine, 2000), online ethnography (Hart, 2017; Wang & Liu, 2021), cyber-ethnography, and digital ethnography (Oreg & Babis, 2021). By and large, netnography is a qualitative method of inquiry that draws its inspiration from the traditional ethnographic approach (Addeo, Paoli, Esposito, & Bolcato, 2019; Caliandro, 2018; Hart, 2017; Kozinets, 2010; 2015; Oreg & Babis, 2021). This qualitative method of inquiry emerged vis a vis the introduction of the internet in the early 1990's (Angelone, 2019; Hart, 2017). Online ethnographic approach to qualitative inquiry has now become widespread as it has moved from an emerging activity to an established practice (Hetland & Mørch**,** 2016) in many academic disciplines though its scientific approach to inquiry was initially challenged.

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Kozinets (2010) describes netnography as an adaptation of the traditional ethnography for the online world in order to study the contingencies of online communities as well as their cultures. Today's socio-cultural world as we live in has gone digital. There is hardly any distinction between the online socio-cultural lives and those of the real life since the two have blended into one world—a world that makes use of technology to communicate, socialise and express (Kozinets, 2010).

As a result, netnography aims to capture these cultural and social experiences which are found in online spaces in a holistic manner through observations and interviews which are mediated by computers (Hart, 2017; Oreg & Babis, 2021). The richly exploratory, highly contextualised and analytical approach nature of netnography makes it an automatic fit for exploring culture in computer-mediated spaces (Hart, 2017).

As noted earlier, human life has gone digital. Among the socio-cultural acts which have moved online include naming, representation of self and identity constructions. Applying the netnographic approach to the study of university students' naming practices and identity constructions through their usernames in a WhatsApp group gives an insight into the significance of names in the digital milieu and the affordance the technology has provided to people in terms of using this technology in constructing their identities to other digital natives as it has been posited that netnography helps the researcher to analyse the complex ways through which culture is shaped and is in turn shaped by the technological platforms on and through which it occurs (Hart, 2017).

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One of the key terms associated with traditional ethnography is field site which is defined as a physical setting where the ethnographer spends time to study a particular social group or community. It appears then that doing ethnography online may mean abandoning the notion that one studies a defined social group or community (Hine, 2015). However, that is not the case as the netnographic approach enables the researcher to conceptualise online platforms, in this case the WhatsApp group used for the study, as a thriving cultural community which is an equivalent of a village or a family or a neighbourhood (Kozinets, 2011), as in the sense of doing traditional ethnography. As opined by Udenze and Ugoala (2019), CMC which takes place on social media platforms such as WhatsApp is expanding by day, and there is therefore the need to utilise a research approach that is cyber-centric. A justification for selecting this approach for the present study.

Traditional ethnography, which means "portrait of a people" is a methodology for descriptive studies of people and cultures, and it requires that participants used in a particular study should have something in common (Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 2009). Such things include geographical boundary. That is, the participants should be defined by the same geographical boundary. Because netnography is an adaptation of traditional ethnography, it was chosen for this study since the participants used in my study were defined by the same geographical boundary.

Past studies on naming practices, self-representation and identity construction through usernames have not utilised netnography as a method of inquiry. Using this approach therefore sets this present study apart from

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previous ones and offers the researcher the opportunity to carry out an in-depth ethnographic analysis through observations and interviews.

Population

The aim of the study is to find how Ghanaian university students, specifically UCC students construct their online identities through their WhatsApp usernames. As a result, the population of the study comprised UCC students. First year students who were almost completing their second semester for the 2020 academic year, and were Ghanaians, and were eighteen years and above were the target population.

Sampling Procedure

The volunteer sampling technique was used in the study. With this sampling method, participants self-select themselves in order to be part of the study (Sharma, 2017). A message of advertisement on the study was sent to the students on the WhatsApp group which formed the site for the study for interested persons to agree to partake in the study. A total of 138 students in the WhatsApp group gave their consent to partake in the study. However, 64 people availed themselves to be interviewed.

Data Collection Instrument

The main instrument used in collecting participants' data was the semi-structured interview guide (kindly refer to Appendix A). The guide was designed by me (the researcher). However, the guide was subsequently vetted by my research supervisor. The necessary revisions were based on the recommendations of the supervisor. The semi-structured interview guide was in three sections: Section A, Section B and Section C. The Section A sought to get participants' responses to some information such as the period they have

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used their usernames on WhatsApp. Section B sought participants' information on the factors which influenced their username choices. Section C contained questions about the kinds of identity participants sought to project through their choice of usernames on WhatsApp. Since the interview guide was semi-structured, sometimes participants' responses gave room for the researcher to follow up with probing questions.

Data Collection Procedures

Data used in the study were in two forms: usernames of participants (extant) and transcripts of interviews with participants (elicited).

The researcher was interested in finding out about the naming practices of UCC students on a particular WhatsApp platform. Consequently, the names of these students as used on the WhatsApp platform were observed on a weekly basis for a period of three months. That is, from October 2021 to December, 2021. The participant unobtrusive observation method was used to enable the researcher learn about the naming practices of the members in the WhatsApp group. I became a member of the WhatsApp group by obtaining permission from the group administrator. This enabled me to participate in some of the conversations in the group. Through this, I was able to watch the names of the members in the group. Members did not have any knowledge that I was studying the usernames. This method was used in order to avoid any biased environment when research participants know they are under observation (Sveningsson, 2004). Phone screenshots of the usernames (see Appendix B) were taken and saved in a folder on an iPhone 7 plus (Hart, 2017; Kozinets, 2010). Doing this helped the researcher take inventory of the naming practices of the participants.

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Having taken an inventory of the usernames of the participants by means of observations, the researcher needed to unearth the factors that influenced the choice of the usernames of participants and also the identities they sought to construct with their usernames. In netnography, data collection means communicating with members of a culture or community, and this communication can take many forms among which are relevant involvement, contact and interaction with community members (Kozinets, 2010). The researcher had interactions with community members through interviewing them. Interview was used to seek the viewpoints of participants. Through interviews, netnographers are able to broaden their understanding of what they observe online (Salmons, 2018; Kozinets, 2010). An invitation to participate in an online interview was extended to all people in the WhatsApp group through their contact numbers found in the group (Angelone, 2019; Kozinets, 2011; Kutor, 2017). Sixty-four participants availed themselves to be interviewed. An interview session was held between the researcher and 64 participants. The researcher booked an appointment with each of the participants. The time agreed upon for the interview was at the convenience of the participants.

It has been noted that SMNs such as WhatsApp is useful for online interviewing (Kozinets, 2010). In line with this, all the interviews took place on WhatsApp at different times of the day. Two key advantages are associated with the use of WhatsApp as the medium of interview: WhatsApp offers both synchronous and asynchronous characteristics. This means that conversations can happen in real time or not in real time. Participants could respond to the questions in real time or at a later time if busy. Again, using WhatsApp for the

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conduct of the interview saved the researcher from transcription concerns (Kozinets, 2010). Each interview lasted for about 20 to 30 minutes on the average. Throughout the interview session, the researcher asked probing and clarifying questions, staying open to interesting elaborations (Kozinets, 2010). The transcripts of each interview were exported from WhatsApp to my email account and subsequently downloaded onto a laptop and saved in a folder.

Data Analysis

In order to address the research questions formulated to guide the study, the data gathered were analysed using content and thematic analysis methods. Data for Research Question One was analysed using content analysis. The results were represented using descriptive statistics in the forms of frequency tables and percentages. The data for Research Question Two and Research Question Three were analysed using thematic analysis, specifically, the inductive thematic analysis. The next section presents an overview of the methods employed in the analysis of data.

Content Analysis (CA)

Content analysis is a methodological approach that is broadly concerned with the objective, systematic and quantitative coding and description of the content of communication (Herring, 2010). It is a research method where features of textual, visual or aural materials are systematically categorised and recorded for analysis (Coe & Scacco, 2017). Herring notes that this methodological approach to analysing data has increasingly been used to analyse content on the internet. I employed content analysis approach in analysing the data for Research Question One. This is because the emphasis of content analysis is on counting or frequency, where a researcher counts the

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occurrences of words, phrase or theme in a particular data set (Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 2009).

Central to doing quantitative content analysis is coding. Coding refers to assigning a name, tag or number to a particular category of data. I employed coding by identifying the units of data, fitting them into categories and assigning codes to the categories. Fitting of units of data into categories was done by engaging in constant comparison, where units of data with the same characteristics are fitted within the same category and given the same code whereas units of data that are different in important ways are put into another category and given another code (Grinnell & Unrau, 2018). This process was replicated until all the data units were categorised.

The results from the analysis were presented visually by using descriptive statistics in the form or frequency distribution tables and percentages to represent the number of times a particular category of username occurred.

Thematic Analysis (TA)

Thematic analysis is a method of analysing qualitative data with the sole aim of identifying, analysing and reporting repeated patterns from the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017). This method of analysis enables the researcher to understand the thoughts, experiences, as well as behaviours of people from the data set (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017) by analysing the data into themes. TA offers some form of flexibility to the researcher in relation to data sources, sample size and meaning generation. This is so because TA can be used to analyse data from different sources, be it face to face or online, small data set

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or large data set; from large interview studies with participants over sixty (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017.).

There are two basic approaches to TA. These are inductive thematic analysis and deductive thematic analysis. In inductive thematic analysis, themes are generated from the data whereas in deductive thematic analysis, a pre-existing theory or framework is used to generate themes from the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In this study, I employed the inductive thematic analytical framework. This is because, I set out to find out the kinds of theme that will emerge from the data other than approaching the data with pre-existing themes.

To employ TA as method of analysing data, Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six recurring steps that the researcher must follow. First, the researcher employing TA as method of data analysis must familiarise himself with the data by repeatedly and actively reading through the data set. Secondly, the researcher must generate initial codes to the data. This, according to Kiger and Varpio (2020), is the true first analytic step in the data analysis process as it helps the researcher organise data. The next step is to search for emerging themes from the coded and collated data set. The researcher does this by analysing, combining and comparing the relationships between the coded data. Step four is two-level analytical process. In the first level, the researcher must do well to ensure that the coded data placed within each theme fits properly by reviewing all relevant codes and extracted data. Data within each theme should show adequate commonality and coherence, and should also be distinct enough to merit separation. At this level, data extracts should be re-sorted and themes must be modified in order to reflect the data captured. It is suggested

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by Kiger and Varpio (2020) that at this level, themes can be added, combined, separated or be done away with. In the step two of this step, the researcher re-reads the entire data set to examine themes to recode for additional data that comes under the themes which have been newly created or modified. In the fifth step, the researcher defines and assigns name tags to each theme identified. Names selected for each theme must be reviewed to ensure they are concise and descriptive enough. Data extracts that will represent key features of the themes are selected. The final stage of TA is the report writing. This stage is seen as the continuation of the preceding stage. Here, much attention is given to the analysis and description of findings. The report should weave together a narrative that provides a concise and logical account of how the researcher interprets data (Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

The ITA analysis procedure was employed in the analysis of Research Question Two and Research Question Three. Research Question Two was analysed by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps in doing ITA. I familiarised myself with the data gathered on the factors that informed participant's choice of WhatsApp usernames by reading through the transcripts three times. During this time, I made note of relevant statements which could later be used to generate preliminary codes. I then started coding all the 64 transcripts on the factors that influenced the choice of usernames. Similarities and differences among the codes were identified in order to help their organisation into themes. I then evaluated the themes to check whether they were distinct enough to merit a separation or similar enough to merit combination. Seven distinct themes were identified. The seven identified

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themes were described by assigning accurate descriptive name to each theme. Finally, each theme was described in details to reflect participant's ideas.

Research Question Three was also analysed using the inductive thematic analysis method. The analysis was done by using the six-step approach to doing ITA. In order to familiarise myself with the data, I read through the transcripts on the kinds of identity constructed through WhatsApp usernames three times. Relevant notes which would help to generate preliminary codes were made. All transcripts on the kinds of identity constructed through the choice of WhatsApp usernames were coded independently. This was done by assigning preliminary codes to the emerging themes. The themes were adequately evaluated to ensure they deserved separation or combination. Seven distinct themes finally emerged from the data. These themes were assigned accurate descriptive names. Each theme was then followed by detailed explanations to reflect participant's ideas.

Ethical Considerations

Human subject research is a research in which the researcher interacts with another person (participant of the study) for the purpose of collecting data in such a way that the person can be identified through it either directly or indirectly (Kozinets, 2015). A netnographic study of this nature fits into the human subject research model as the researcher interacted with other people to gather information for the study. In line with this, some ethical issues such as informed consent, protection of participants' unnecessary risk or harm, and voluntary withdrawal of participants from the study at any time of the study, as inscribed in the Nuremberg Code of 1947 (Eynon , Fry, & Schroeder, 2017; Grinnell & Unrau, 2018; Kozinets, 2015) had to be dealt with.

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To ensure that the conduct of this research followed the best research practices, I applied for ethical clearance (see Appendix C) from the Institutional Review Board of UCC (UCC-IRB), through the Department of English, UCC, before data was collected. An online recruitment and informed consent form which detailed the purpose of the study, participant's rights and obligations was sent to members in the WhatsApp group to sign (Angelone, 2019). This helped me to know those who had accepted to be part of the study and had given me their consent to use information I had gathered from the observation, or the information they provided in the course of the interview.

The primary objective of the study was to explore how identity was constructed through WhatsApp usernames. As a result, names collected could not be tampered with by anonymising them as this would affect the true identity constructed by the usernames (Kozinets, 2011). In view of this, participants were made aware that with their consent, their usernames would be used in the analysis of the study. Some of the participants were willing for their names to be explicitly used in the study (Wiles, Pain, & Crow, 2011). Nonetheless, the researcher assessed the data and realised that the use of the usernames would not pose any harm or danger to the research participants now or in the future (Kozinets, 2015). Moreover, usernames of the participants can be viewed as data available to the public. Notwithstanding, participants who declined to the use of their WhatsApp usernames in the study had their usernames expunged.

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Challenges Encountered

The qualitative researcher is constantly confronted with a number of challenges in the process of conducting a research (Khankeh, Ranjbar, Khorasani-Zavareh, Zargham-Boroujeni, & Johansson, 2015). Just like with any qualitative researcher, I encountered a number of challenges in the conduct of this research. One of the major challenges I had to grapple with came during the collection of data through the interview sessions on WhatsApp. Since the interviews were conducted through typing, there were instances where participants' responses were not clear or even sounded ambiguous. This challenge was addressed by asking participants to audio record what they wished to put forward. Such audio messages were later transcribed and incorporated into the dataset.

In the course of conducting this research, I was also faced with an ethical dilemma which had to do with anonymity of the participants. Anonymity in research is when no part of the data collected reveals the identity of the participants. This means that participants' names and other identifying information are not collected (Grinnell & Unrau, 2018). However, the main data collected in this study were usernames since I wanted to find the characteristics of such usernames. I considered altering the usernames problematic for two reasons: altering the data may not give true characteristics of the exact data collected and also, altering a username may end up being another WhatsApp user's username. Though usernames collected are already in the public domain, I considered it wrong to use them without critically analysing its ethical repercussions. After analysing the data collected, I

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realised that they will not pose any harm to the research participants so I used the usernames in their original form with the consent of the participants.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the methodological procedures followed in this study. An overview of the research approach and design used in this study were presented. The population, sampling procedure, data collection instrument, as well as the data collection procedures were also discussed in this chapter. The methods of data analysis and the ethical considerations regarding the conduct of this study were also presented. Finally, the challenges I encountered during the study, and how I went about them were presented in this chapter. In the next chapter, I present the results and discussion of the study.

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CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview

The purpose of the study was to find how some students of UCC construct their identities through the choice of usernames on WhatsApp. I used the netnographic design which has its roots in the qualitative research approach. A total of 138 UCC first year students took part in the study. This chapter therefore presents the findings and the discussions of the data gathered. These are done with the guidance of the research questions set for the study, as well as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning the study. In the first three sections of the chapter, I present the results of the data analysed. In the following section, I further present a discussion on the findings. To cap it all, the final part is a presentation of a comprehensive summary of this part of the study.

Overview of Participants

To establish the credence of the participants of the study in relation to their use and knowledge of WhatsApp and username, the following overview is given.

Most of the participants indicated that they had been using WhatsApp for a considerable number of years. The years they had been using WhatsApp consistently ranged from four to nine years. This means that some started using it from the time they were in the junior high school. This also shows that most of them started using WhatsApp even before their admission into the University and as a result, have become experienced users of the app. It can be said that the participants therefore are aware of the affordances of the

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WhatsApp platform, including the ability to construct and display their identities.

Participants also shared their knowledge of usernames. They demonstrated that they have an idea of what username is and its role on the platform. One of the participants said:

> *Username is the name a person uses to register for a social media page which is seen by public.*

Another participant added:

> *Ok from my point of view, I can say that a username is a particular name basically used by someone, that name might not be the real name of the person.*

Another participant also showed an understanding of what a username is in relation to the forms it can be and also the function it can play on the platform.

> *A username is a group of letters usually names, or numbers one uses as a form of identification on online platforms.*

This was supported by another participant who intimated that:

> *The name or identity we use that is visible to everyone, it could be your full name, nick name or your name's initials.*

The participants also indicated their attachment to their usernames. That is, most of the participants had become so attached to their usernames that they have stuck to their use on WhatsApp and even on other social media networks for a relatively long period. On the average, most of the participants have consistently used their WhatsApp usernames for more than a year. As stated by Bechar-Israeli (1995), though usernames can easily be changed, people tend to build their online identities on a stable username. This view is also

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supported by Cornetto and Nowak (2006) who opine that people tend to use their usernames for a long period of time.

This section of the chapter presents findings of the data to answer the research question 1:

What are the categories of username of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?

The purpose of this research question was to seek and have an idea about the categories of usernames that UCC first year students use on their WhatsApp platform. Studies have shown that people select different kinds of usernames to represent them on social media platforms (Aleksiejuk, 2013; Del-teso-Craviotto, 2008; Hassa, 2012; Xu, Huang, Jiang, & Zou, 2020). The case is not different among university students (Busabaa, 2017). To do this, usernames of the participants were observed for three months. Usernames of those who gave their consent to partake in the study totalling 138 were selected. Usernames were not edited. This was to give the exact representation of the names. This set of data was analysed by coding. That is, assigning name to a category of usernames. The results were presented using descriptive statistics in the form frequencies and percentages and followed by description of the data. The findings are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of WhatsApp Username of UCC Students

Username	Frequency	Percentage
Real name only	53	38.4
Nickname only	55	39.9
Real name plus nickname	20	14.5
Emoji only	10	7.2
Total	138	100

Source: Field data (2021)

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Table 1 presents username categories identified in the data and their corresponding frequencies and percentages. The findings from the data revealed that the students used real names only, nicknames only, a combination of real name and nickname, and emoji only as their WhatsApp usernames. In what follows, a detailed analysis of the results in this section is presented.

One of the recorded username category as presented in the table is real name only. This category of username appeared in 53 out of the total 138 usernames gathered, representing 38.4% of the total population of usernames gathered. The data further showed that this category of username occurred with variations (Aleksiejuk, 2016). The variants of this category identified in the data were first names only, first names plus surname, day name plus first name, surname only, modified first name only, and initialised names. The data showed that some of these variants of username were accompanied by emoji and other symbols. Table 2 shows the variants of the real names used as WhatsApp usernames.

Table 2: Variants of Real Names as Usernames

Variants of real names as usernames	Examples
First name only	Hayford, Rachael, Teddy
First name plus surname	Nhyira Baidoo, Andrews Wakah
Day name plus first name	Adjoa Bertie,
Surname only	Kwansah, Huzyf
Modified first name	Sari, Lina, Shaddy, Bennie
Initialised names	TI, TEA

Field data (2021)

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Another category of username identified and as shown in Table 1 is the nickname only. The nickname only username category had the highest number of occurrence of 55 out of the total 138 usernames, representing 39.9% of the total usernames. These nicknames were names of footballers (Lexis Reus, Shugha Baggio) title of a song (ABC of Love, Chiraqimony), name of bible character (Cleopas), names of historic personalities (Jacobus Capitein, Leibniz), name of historic tribe (Viking), names of musicians (Sharkor, T.I, Young Akon), name of movie character (Sherlock) academic title (PROF), and names that reflected a concept (Self, 1st Rhebel, Diplomat, Nya Asem Hwe, Wealthy, let the pain flow through you, And It Ended In Tears, Starpathrie), academic title plus a nickname (Prof. Akrantie). Table 3 shows the variants of nicknames used as usernames on WhatsApp.

Table 3: Variants of Nicknames as Usernames

Variants of nicknames as usernames	Examples
Names of footballers	Reus, Baggio
Title of a song	ABC of Love, Chiraqimony
Bible characters	Cleopas
Names of historic personalities	Jacobus Capitein, Leibniz
Names of historic tribe	Viking, Zulu
Names of musicians	Sharkor, T.I, Young Akon
Academic title	Prof, Economist
Academic title plus nickname	Prof Akrantie
Name of movie character	Sherlock, The Rock
Name of a concept	Nya Asem Hwe, Wealthy, and it ended in tears

Field data (2021)

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The data also revealed that some participants blended their real names with their nicknames as their WhatsApp usernames. This category of username appeared 20 times out of the total 138 usernames, representing 14.5% of the usernames. Some of the examples from the data include Lina Bae, Uplinking Kelvin, Bisa Saani).

The data revealed that participants used emojis only as their username on WhatsApp. This category of username appeared 10 out of the total 138 usernames collected, accounting for 7.2% of the usernames. As indicated earlier, some participants used emojis in addition to their names, whether real names or nicknames. However, in this category, only emojis were used to represent the participants' username. The categories of username identified in this study share similar characteristics with those that have been identified in similar studies such as Bechar-Israeli (1995), Hassa (2012) and Xu, Huang, Jiang and Zou (2020),

The following section of the chapter is a presentation of the results on the factors that influenced participants' choice of WhatsApp usernames. The analysis was guided by the second research question formulated for the study:

What factors influence the choice of usernames of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?

The second research question was formulated to ascertain the factors that influenced the choice of WhatsApp usernames by the participants. This was necessary because very few studies on usernames have paid any attention to finding out the rationale behind the use of usernames, and those who have done so have mostly relied on impressionistic analysis (Bechar-Israeli, 1995; Hassa, 2012). This research question was addressed by gathering interview

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data and analysing the data through inductive thematic analysis approach. The emerging themes from the data were as follows: easy identification, for disguise or anonymity, to reflect a historical personality, and to reflect current happenings in one's environment.

Easy identification

The most popular factor that influenced participants' choice of a certain username on WhatsApp was easy identification. Most of the participants in one way or the other expressed that they selected certain usernames that made them easily identifiable to other interlocutors on the WhatsApp platform. For instance, a participant gave the following response when asked about the reason behind the choice of his username.

> *The reason is that in school, home, church and my workplace as well I used to be called Prof. So few people know that I'm called Ben. That's why I chose to use Prof instead of my original name. So I chose PROF so that people who know me but might not have saved my contact on whatsapp can easily identify me.*

Another participant had similar response to the same question:

> *When chatting unknown people, the username is the first place the unknown person visits before the message is replied. So I think it helps people to recognize me quicker.*

Another participant also gave the following response.

> *ABC is the initials of my name and most people address me with that I subsequently chose that for easy identification.*

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Another participant added:

> *When chatting with my friends or other people who don't have my contact it very easy for them to identify me please.*

Another participant said:

> *I use the username JAY, a shortened form of my birth name. JAY is easy for my contacts to identify me and even easy for them to refer to me in a chat than writing the full name which I think will be difficult for my contacts to identify and refer to me as such.*

The foregoing indicate that users of WhatsApp are conscious of the fact that people who might not have saved their contacts may not be able to recognise them on that platform. They therefore choose a username that will make such people—be it family or friends or even new contacts—easily identify them on the app.

It is also not always the case that what drives a WhatsApp user to select a particular username is the desire to be easily recognisable. Sometimes, WhatsApp users select a username in order to obscure their identity to their contacts who might not have saved their contact on their phone.

To keep one anonymous

Another factor that influenced the choice of a particular WhatsApp username was the desire of participants to remain anonymous to their contacts. For various reasons, the participants decided to use usernames that would not reveal who they are to their old or new contacts. The following excerpts from the data gathered through the interview sessions corroborate the assertion made above. There were various reasons assigned to the desire to be anonymous or for the disguise.

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One of the participants who was interviewed wanted to be under guise to strangers. She retorted:

> *I chose this username because it was one I felt comfortable with. I used it on WhatsApp because I didn't want to use my real name. I feel really insecure when strangers know my name.*

For another participant, choosing the username was to be under guise to lost friends.

> *I didn't want to use my actual name. I wanted to disguise myself from lost friends I had their contact without them knowing.*

Another participant had a similar story to tell.

> *This name is my surname which is not too popular among my friends and loved ones. I've decided to use this name so that I will be anonymous to many members in the WhatsApp groups where I find myself. I want to be anonymous because I've lost contact with many people and I want to be so for some time. Although I'll change it soon, for now, I don't want them to identify me.*

To another participant, the reason to disguise was to prevent her contacts in groups from knowing her gender:

> *The main reason why I used it was for my gender to be anonymous in groups. Because people named Carl are usually males.*

The above statement supports Scheidt's (2001) that most people in online communities who do not use their real names, or use gender neutral usernames do so in an attempt to remain anonymous to other people in the online community.

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From the data gathered from the interviews, it was revealed that participants selected usernames in order to reflect the character traits or the personality of some iconic figures whether dead or alive, fictitious or real.

Reflecting the personality of a historical figure and current or future ambitions

Reflecting the personality of a historical figure also influenced the choice of WhatsApp usernames among participants. An individual may choose a name and use it as his or her WhatsApp username following the desire to reflect the personality of some historical figures unveiled in a written document, audio or audio-visual modes. To many participants, such usernames hold some private significance.

A participant who read about Scottish history identified the name *Celtic Warrior* and decided to use that as his WhatsApp username. This is what the participant said when asked about what influenced this choice of his username.

> *I love that name, I kind of like the character the name defines. I was reading about the history of the people of Scotland. Celtic warrior was a name given to once a brave and fearsome Scottish warrior in the late 300BC. I see myself as a warrior; one who is ready to fight my way through to success against every obstacle.*

The above excerpt reveals what drove the participant to use Celtic warrior as his WhatsApp username. According to him, the name symbolises bravery and one who is fearsome to his opponents in war. He therefore decided to use this name because he sees himself in the attributes the name characterises.

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Similar explanations were given by another participant as to what influenced his choice of username on WhatsApp.

> *My mum got me this book [Sherlock Holmes] when I was young and I liked the character a lot so I picked his name [Sherlock]. His ability to notice details and find clues in his investigation that no one could. I wish I was like him. I started thinking almost like he did after that book.*

This participant chose the name of a fictitious character called *Sherlock Holmes* when he read about him in the novel. The participant decided to use such name as his username on WhatsApp because of the attributes the bearer of the name exhibited in the story. Interestingly, the participant noted that he almost immediately began to act like the character *Sherlock Holmes* in the novel.

While some of the participants chose characters found in novels, others also chose the names of bible characters. The following was the explanation given by one of the participants who chose the name of a bible character as the WhatsApp username. He indicated:

> *I one day heard of the name Cleopas in church during service. I liked the name. So after service I opened the Bible and found it in the book of Luke 24. I had wanted to add it to my name because of its meaning—The Glory of the Father. So since then I decided to use it.*

While some participants chose names that reflected their very characters, others chose names that would influence them to act and behave or become the attributes the name they chose as their WhatsApp usernames reflected. The following excerpt is a reason given by a participant as to why he chose the

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name of a historical figure in academia in the field of mathematics. He had this to say:

> *Leibniz is a great Mathematician who I got to know about in my time in SHS. I chose the name as my Whatsapp username because I want to be like him—a great Mathematician.*

The main reason that influenced this participant's choice of WhatsApp username was the desire to become like *Leibniz*- a great Mathematician.

In explaining what influenced the choice of his WhatsApp username, the following reason was given by another participant.

He indicated:

> *I use the username 'wealthy'. I have used this username consecutively for more than two years. I know wealthy is a term used to describe someone who has enough money and is comfortable in life. As there is a saying that what you usually say comes your way. I want to be very rich in future so I use the name wealthy. I really communicate this to my whatsapp contacts so that it will remind me of my targets as well as ring a bell in the ears of my contacts that I will be wealthy.*

From the above excerpt, it is revealed that the participant chose that username to reflect who he wishes to become in future and communicate same to his WhatsApp contacts.

Some participants also chose certain usernames because those names reflected their current career path. The following excerpt tells the reason behind the choice of the WhatsApp username by this participant:

> *Aside being a student, I also play football as a profession. Sometime ago, I had so many names when I was in the soccer academy. There*

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was a coach from France who came to the academy. He started calling me Reus because he said I played like that German player. I also decided to go with that name. I chose to use the name as my whatsapp username because I am a footballer.

From the above excerpt, it can be said that the participant chose that username because it reflected his career as a footballer.

Another participant gave the following explanation as the factor that influenced the choice of his WhatsApp username.

As I indicated earlier, I love rap especially those from Akon, so I named myself Young Akon since primary school. I have been using that name since I started using WhatsApp, so 5 years. I added young, because I am not the real Akon.

The above excerpt also shows that the participant's WhatsApp username reflects his career path as a music rapper whose rap idol is Akon.

Not only did participants choose WhatsApp usernames to help their contacts to identity them easily or to remain anonymous to their contacts or to reflect their attributes or future ambitions, but also to indicate some current happenings in their immediate environment.

To indicate happenings in life

Some people use their WhatsApp usernames to inform their contacts on the platform on some common occurrences in their environment. That is, through their WhatsApp usernames, they play the role of an informer. A participant who disclosed his username as *And it all ended in tears* indicated the factor that influenced her choice of this username. She said:

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> *I changed my username to 'it all ended in tears' last semester. During that time, all you would hear on campus was 'it ended in tears'. There was so much broken heart then. I had also experienced broken heart but mine was before coming to the university. I used this name to inform others, particularly my contacts on whatsapp about common happenings on campus so that at least some ladies and gentlemen alike will be cautious choosing their partners and in their relationships with their lovers.*

The text portrays the bearer of this username as an informer in the general university campus. This means that anyone who sees this participant's WhatsApp username and would like to know the reason behind the choice of it will be informed of what is happening in the general university community in matters related to amorous relationships.

When interviewed, another participant had this to share about his username which was *Nya Asem Hwe*, which means "get into trouble and see". He indicated:

> *My username is a popular saying in Akan. It is someone's surname that I use to hear every day and because I liked it, I used it. In this world, you may think people like you until you get into trouble. Even though I am not that old, I've witnessed circumstances whereby people can reject you. People may smile with you, but get into trouble and see. My username is a way of communicating to my whatsapp contacts that no matter how good you are to people, they will turn against you in times when you are trouble. That shouldn't surprise you.*

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In the excerpt above, the participant uses his username to inform his contacts on WhatsApp about the nature of some people in the environment where we find ourselves. He does this through his choice of username on WhatsApp.

Kinds of identity constructed through WhatsApp usernames

This section of the chapter is a presentation of the results on identities constructed through WhatsApp usernames by the participants. The analysis was guided by the third research question formulated for the study:

What kinds of identity are constructed through the usernames of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?

The purpose of this research question was to ascertain the kinds of identity constructed through the choice of usernames. This is because personal names are representatives of some identities of the bearer of the name (Barton & Lee, 2013; van der Nagel, 2017). Identity construction in modern times, does not only occur in traditional offline contexts thanks to the advent of social media platforms such as WhatsApp. WhatsApp affords individuals, especially the youth in schools such as the university to construct and project their identities to the public. As indicated by Turkle (1996), virtual social networking sites such as WhatsApp are workshops for individuals to construct their identities. These constructed identities can be overt or covert.

On WhatsApp, one of the tools users may rely on to construct their identities is the username. It is therefore not surprising at all that from the data I gathered and analysed thematically, usernames used by participants served as the vehicle for constructing who they are, who they wish to be and how they relate to and make sense of their social world. Identities constructed by participants through their choice of WhatsApp usernames were religious

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identity, music identity, academic identity, institutional or group affiliation identity, family identity, football identity and self-identity.

Sports (Football) identity

Some participants selected usernames which reflected their sports identity, especially in football. One of the participants who was interviewed had this to say:

> *Baggio is a name I had from my JHS. I like football and De Baggio is one of the Italian great players. Got to know him through his picture, read about him and watched some of his videos and got to like him. So I choose to go by that. The username represents me as a football lover and a football player.*

Another participant had this to say:

> *Aside being a student, I also play football as a profession. Sometime ago, I had so many names when I was in the soccer academy. There was a coach from France who came to the academy. He started calling me Reus because he said I played like that German player. I also decided to go with that name. I chose to use the name as my whatsapp username because I am a footballer.*

From the above excerpts, the usernames revealed an identity of the participants which is their sports identity, specifically, football. The names identify the participants as people who enjoy playing or watching the game of football, and their contacts who come across their names on WhatsApp are likely to associate them to this sport.

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Family identity

Some of the usernames chosen by participants also represented their family. Some did this by using the family's surname or creatively designing a username that will be an icon of the family.

A participant who used the family surname had this to say:

> *I used Bempah cos is a family name that is mostly used by my family. It is the surname of my family.*

In the Ghanaian Akan society, surname is an important name given to a baby during their naming ceremony. The surname specifically shows the family which a person comes from or belongs to. Choosing such a name in the online space enables the bearer of the name to be associated with a certain family and identifies the person with the characteristics of that family (Agyekum, 2006; Sekyi-Baidoo, 2019).

Results from the study also showed that a person's family identity can be constructed through creating names to represent one's family. From the data, a participant chose to creatively couch a username to represent her family. She explained:

> *My WhatsApp username is actually the initials of the names of my parents, siblings and I. I was using the name on my books at school, so when I got the chance to use WhatsApp, that name popped up, and I used it. The username always reminds me of my family and helps me to never forget my family.*

From the above, the usernames help the bearer to identify with her family and therefore shares the identity of the family which she belongs to although such identity is covert.

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Religious identity

One of the identities that was revealed from the data gathered was related to religion. Usernames of participants reflected the religion one belonged to. From the data, two religious identities were revealed. These were the Christian identity and the Muslim identity.

The following participant who is a Muslim revealed his Muslim identity through his choice of username on WhatsApp. He said the following:

> *The name was derived from history, one of the greatest war that Muslims had victory. The name of that battle was called Badar, and in the Arabic language every name has to end with the vowel 'u'. It tells something about my name and the religion I'm in.*

Another participant who is a Christian revealed his Christianity identity through his choice of WhatsApp username.

> *I one day heard of the name Cleopas in church during service. I liked the name. So after service I opened the Bible and found it in the book of Luke 24. I had wanted to add it to my name because of its meaning. So since then I decided to use it. I wanted the meaning of my names to be, The Peaceable Glory of the Father (God).*

The references made to Cleopas, which is a Bible character, portrays the person as a Christian thereby revealing his religious identity.

Another participant who is a Christian used the name of her church as her username. She indicated:

> *My username is the acronym for my church. I liked it and I thought I should use it as my username.*

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The above excerpt reveals a certain identity, in this case, the religious identity of the participant.

Institutional/Group affiliation identity

Some participants also chose names that identified them as belonging to particular social groups, thereby revealing their identities as belonging to such groups and identified by the norms and practices of these groups.

A participant had this to say:

> *My username represents a community group of my friends of which I am part. Each person uses the username after their surname*.

To further deepen the claim that usernames reveal the group identity of a person, a participant had this to say:

> *I used that username because of my hall of residency. Since I've been residing there for a year, I still kept it. Probably I'll change it after I'm done schooling. It's about UNICASSAR. An acronym for the 3 dominant halls in the 3 best public tertiary institutions in Ghana, namely UCC, KNUST and UG. And the 'love' emoji reps the colours of the Halls. Casely Hayford Hall... UCC. University Hall... KNUST. John Mensah Sarbah Hall... UG. The username speaks a lot 'bout me personally....For instance, the drive and passion I've got for the hall is there and also two of best friends are in John Mensah Sarbah and University Halls respectively.*

From the excerpts, it is seen that people use their usernames to construct the identity of their social groups or an institution which they belong to. It must be noted however that such identities constructed through the usernames are not

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overt; they are those known to the bearer of the name and those belonging to the same group with the person.

Music identity

Some of the participants also revealed their identity as fans of music by selecting usernames that portrayed them as such. They did this by choosing usernames that were names of their favourite musicians or titles of some of their favourite songs or the name of a music group. The following was said by one of the participants:

> *As I indicated earlier, I love rap especially those from Akon, so I named myself Young Akon since primary school.*

Another participant who also chose the name of a musician had this to say:

> *My username has relationship with an American rapper. He was my favourite rapper. I therefore told my friends I wanted to be called that name, and I also used it as my username on whatsapp.*

Another participant who selected some lyrics of a song as username said this:

> *My username shows my love for music. I used it because of Oheneba kissi's song with the line* ABC of love, 123 of the story.*

Another participant added his voice in his regard:

> *Actually chiraqimony is the name of my favorite song.*

Another participant revealed his identity with music by using the name of his music group as his WhatsApp username. He explained as thus:

> *I told you earlier I do music, you mentioned Shatta Wale and his group is SM 4 LYF and Stonebwoy has Bhim Nation. I have RHEBELSYDE and because I started it I'm the 1st Rhebel and we have 2nd and 3rd Rhebels. The rest are just Rhebels so it's like a title of the music group.*

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The excerpts show different ways through which participants use their WhatsApp usernames to construct and display their music identities. Whereas some participants chose the names of musicians, some chose the titles of their favourite songs and some also chose the names of their music group to display their music identity. Some of the usernames revealed the participants as music lovers while some of the usernames revealed the participants as musicians themselves.

Academic identity

Participants also chose usernames that positioned them in the field of academia, thus revealing their academic identity. They did this by choosing academic titles or names of people that resonate in academia.

A participant revealed this during the interview:

> *Way back in senior high, I was a great scholar when it comes to core mathematics and Economics where my colleagues used to call me Prof. which ended up as an eternal name to me. My username is special to me because it portrays me as an intellectual.*

Another participant who coincidentally had the username as the one before had this to say:

> *You see, at primary school, it got to a time when all my friends began to add other names to their name. I first chose Benzema because of my name Ben, but guys were mocking me always because I wasn't good in playing football per my name. I later sat down and realized that in terms of academia I'm better than them. That's why I chose the name Prof and they were also eager to call me by that name.*

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Another participant who used the name of a renowned mathematician had this to say:

> *My username is the name of a great Mathematician. I chose it because I want to be like him. I want to be a great Mathematician who will use mathematical principles to solve contemporary situations.*

Self-identity

Some of the usernames chosen by the participants also brought to the fore, some innate characteristics of their selves. They did this by choosing names of people, objects and even animals to reflect their self identities.

A participant had that this to say about her username:

> *I can say I am a haven for people especially those I'm close to and to myself. I consider myself as such because I realised over the years that people are comfortable with confiding in me no matter the situation and are fond of being around me. In application to me, I realised I can find peace in myself too rather than always depending on others for comfort.*

The foregoing excerpt indicates that the username reflected the participant as someone who relied on herself to charter the course of her life and also offered herself as a safe haven for others who may be troubled. This username reveals the identity of the participant as self-relying and independent and also one that others can rely on.

Another participant whose username revealed a personal attribute about him had this to say:

> *My username was a name given to once a brave and fearsome Scottish warrior in the late 300BC. I see myself as a warrior one who is ready*

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to fight my way through to success against every obstacle. The names we use as user names are really important, they identify us to others who don't know us. We should be careful with the names we use because people can use them to judge our identity.

Another participant also had an interesting story to share about his username

The greatest name of all. During shs 1 first term where I got the Akrantie where our seniors decided to give each of us a scientific name in accordance to your conduct in and outside dormitory. I got Akrantie because I was very inquisitive and always curious in which I don't stay at a place over a period of time, you would see me gallivanting around always.

The excerpt above reveals the username of the participant as Akrantie, which is the Akan name for grasscutter, a rodent commonly found in Ghana and other African countries. One attribute of the rodent is its ability to move about swiftly. This username therefore reveals the participant's identity as one who is ubiquitous.

Another participant whose username was dynamite had this to say:

I believe that one day my visionary features will shock the world of days to come. Because people who might read and understand the nature of dynamite would be able to deduce the real meaning of my user name. I went through so many tribulations in my life, so I decided to camouflage myself and explode the world with my hidden potentials.

The excerpt portrays the participant as someone who is motivated to unearth some innate qualities. The dynamite therefore is a metaphor for the

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participant's self-identity as someone who carries the power to unearth his potentials.

Not too different from the concept of dynamite is the term viscous, a term very common in the field of science. Viscous was the username chosen by one of the participants. The participant had this to say when interviewed.

> *Viscous means having a thick or sticky consistency. OR characterized by a high resistance to flow. When life becomes unfavorable, most people choose to say life is unfair because at that moment things get messy and some deviate from their initial plan in life. But for viscous, regardless of what the situation is, it tends to have this high resistance to flow (slip/deviate). I chose Viscous because of how life is (sometimes fair/unfair). I realized that I must be consistent in sticking to my dream plans regardless of what I encounter and not just slip when situations become difficult.*

The above excerpt portrays an innate characteristic of the person which is being focused on her dreams. This identifies the participant as someone who is not swayed by the uncomfortable circumstances of life which may easily dissuade her from achieving her dreams. Thus she has a high resistance to unfortunate events which may bring her dreams to an abrupt end.

Emojis as a semiotic resource for identity construction

Data gathered revealed that not only are usernames in words but some of the participants used emojis and, or both words and emojis in place of username on WhatsApp. The analysis of the data gathered through observation and interviews showed that emojis served as resources for the construction of identity of the participants (Adams, 2017). Participants attached emojis to their

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usernames to communicate a certain identity about them. To find out the significance of the emojis used as usernames or in the company of a username, the researcher found that emojis were used to construct identities such as a person's future career/profession, group affiliation, a feeling, a quality, love for what the emoji used represents, or as a symbol of remembrance.

When interviewed, one participant had this to say:

> *The emojis symbolise the job I want to do. I want to be a software engineer, and as a software engineer you need the laptop and the keyboard.*

The above excerpt shows that emojis were used by some participants to show their future profession. The laptop and the computer keyboard are vital instruments for the software engineer.

Another participant who used the guitar as part of the username shared this as the reason behind the use of the guitar:

> *I'm a singer (minister). And the guitar there signifies, my interest in it even as a singer.*

This shows the identity of the participant as a music lover or a singer. Anyone who sees this emoji is likely to easily associate such an identity with the person.

Other participants also used emojis to show their link to a group thereby showing their group/affiliation identities.

A participant had this to say:

> *It's abt UNICASSAR.... Nd the 'love' emoji reps the colors of d Halls. The sword ⚔ signifies the alliance between the Halls...Being repeated 3 times, shows the strength in d alliance.*

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Another participant shared a similar view:

The red flag *stands for the red brave army. The great Casely Hayford Hall.*

In the same vein, another participant indicated:

The emoji in colour blue signifies my affiliation to the Great Atlantic Hall.

The above excerpts show that as students in the university, the participants attached importance to their affiliation to their halls of residence. This necessitated their use of emojis showing the colours of their respective halls of residence, thereby showing or reminding them of their identity as members of these halls, though this identity was covert rather than overt. However, this sort of identity created may be overt to in-group members of these halls as postulated by the theory of symbolic interactionism.

Another participant also shared her story about her use of emoji as part of her username on WhatsApp.

She indicated:

The butterfly emoji attached to my username indicates my love for butterflies. The butterfly emoji is the only constant in my username.

Another participant also intimated:

Am a lovely person, so everything about me is love. I like love songs, movies, I love people and I love the love emoji as well. I like red colour that is why I used the red love emojis.

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Some participants also used emojis as a symbol of remembrance of a past event.

A participant shared the idea behind the use of an emoji attached to his username:

> *Well at that time I had lost my kid brother and the dove represents his soul flying up to heaven to me.*

The above excerpt illustrates how the emoji of a dove has been used by the participant to represent a dead relative to serve as reminder to him. This signifies an identity of the person as someone mourning a loved one.

Just like the usernames, emojis were also used by some participants to signify their innate characteristics and also show their ethnic identity. A participant who was interviewed on the significance of the emoji used in her username had this to say:

> *That emoji of a hand* 🤌 *stands for exactly or fact, and also I use that rainbow* 🌈 *to signify that my success will be bright as a rainbow. That ninja emoji stands for a fighter, and the swords represent a warrior, and the hand* 💪 *represents strength. They are all in black to show black supremacy.*

In the above excerpt, several identities about the participant are encapsulated in the emojis used. The emojis identify the participant as a fighter, a warrior and someone of strength. In addition, the participant stated that all these emojis have been presented in colour black to signify black supremacy, where the black signifies his ethnic identity as an African.

Another participant also shared her opinion on her use of emoji

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And for the crown emoji, it is to show that 👑 I'm a queen in my own way.

The participant used the crown emoji which signifies royalty to construct a certain identity about her as a queen. Generally, people who see this emoji attached to her username are likely to get the message being put across by the use of the crown.

Discussion

This section of the chapter presents a comprehensive discussion of the findings of data gathered. The discussion is done with reference to literature appropriate to the thesis of this study. The first part of this section presents a discussion of the findings of the categories of usernames as used by some UCC students on WhatsApp. This is be followed by a discussion on the factors that influenced the choice of such usernames. Subsequently, a discussion on the findings on the kinds of identity constructed by some UCC students through their choice of usernames and emojis are discussed.

The study assessed the categories of username used by some UCC students on their WhatsApp platform. This was necessitated by the desire of the researcher to find out about the kinds of username some university students select in the face of technological advancement.

The study found that four main categories of usernames were selected by some UCC students on their WhatsApp. These were real names only, nicknames only, real name plus nickname, emoji only. The study further revealed that whether the usernames were either real names or nicknames, they occurred with some variations. For example, from the data gathered, it was realised that participants' usernames were their real, nicknames, real

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names and nicknames, or real names with emojis or nicknames with emojis. It was further revealed that some used their real names by varying the original spelling of the names. Furthermore, the researcher found that some participants used emojis as their usernames. Typically, emojis are no names but some emojis were used by participants to represent a name or to signify an attribute of the name they have substituted the emoji with.

The findings of this study corroborate those found in studies conducted by Bechar-Israeli (1995), Hassa (2012) and Xu, Huang, Jiang and Zou (2020). The findings from these studies revealed that usernames selected by people on social media sites were either real names with different levels of variations, or nicknames. Though each study was conducted on different social media platforms (Bechar-Israeli's study was conducted on Internet Relay Chat, Hassa's study was conducted on Casa Chat and Xu, Huang, Jiang and Zou's study was conducted on WeChat), and during significantly different periods, similar results were achieved. The similarities in the findings of the study can be attributed to the fact that naming practices are a universal phenomenon and though social and cultural factors may affect the categorisation of such usernames, the broader categories of real names or nicknames can be assigned to these names.

The findings from the study also demonstrate that naming practices on online environments such as social media platforms are similar to offline naming practices and drives home the fact that naming practices is one of the offline practices which is carried in to the online space (Aleksiejuk, 2015). This however contrasts the assertion made by Hagström (2012) that names

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used in on-line computer games, virtual worlds, and web communities are often very different to the ones used in the real world.

The results of the study also showed that names selected by participants reflected names of footballers, musicians, historic figures, bible characters, characters in novels, concepts of what they wished to convey about themselves and their experiences. This finding is in tandem with Hagström (2012). In this study, Hagström gives details of the sources of usernames of the participants in her study. She found that among others, categories of usernames were couched from fantasy novels, sports, mythology, schools, literature, the Bible, religions, music, childhood memories, family members, other languages than English. From the findings, it is seen that some of the usernames were in the Twi language rather than in English. This observation was also found to be true in a study conducted by Bechar-Israeli (1995). Hagström (2012) further indicated that some used their real names with varied spellings; the findings from this study prove this to be true.

The findings from my study also are in line with Subrahmanyam, Greenfield and Tynes (2004) who noted that usernames served as the medium through which people showed their interests such as music and sports and also to convey their aspirations, as well their gender. This is also confirmed in a study conducted by Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008) and Gatson (2011).

One of the inquiries username researchers must set out to do after finding out about what kinds of usernames people use on online platforms is to inquire about why such names are used. Following this, the researcher set out to find out the reasons behind the choice of WhatsApp usernames from participants through interviews. The study also revealed that several factors

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influenced the choice of the usernames of UCC students on their WhatsApp. Usernames were chosen based on different factors. Some chose their usernames so that their contacts could easily identify them, especially in cases where such people might have lost their contacts. Others also chose their usernames in order to conceal who they are to other people on WhatsApp. Again, some also chose their WhatsApp usernames based the fact that such usernames reflected who they want to become in future or the fact that such usernames resonated with their personalities. Others also chose their usernames because they wanted to inform their contacts on WhatsApp about some current happenings in their environment. Some empirical evidence by Xu, Huang, Jiang and Zou (2020) suggests factors that influence the choice of usernames on social media platforms include the desire of the bearer of the name to be identified easily by their contacts and also the desire to conceal their identities from their contacts. This study is a confirmation of such evidence.

After finding the categories of usernames as used by the participants and the reason behind that choice of usernames, the kinds of identity constructed through such usernames were sought from participants. This was important to determine if names used in online social media platforms still serve as vehicles for identity construction or not. The findings from the study suggested that participants heavily constructed and communicated their identities to their contacts on WhatsApp either overtly or covertly. The findings of this study is supported by evidence in studies conducted by Assaggaf (2019), Gora and Muchenje (2020), Jakaza (2020), Kutor (2017) and Mangeya and Ngoshi (2021). The above studies confirm the findings from

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this study that people construct and display their identities in online communities. They also indicate such identities constructed are religious, familial, institutional, academic, ethnic and personal. However, the findings from this study contradicts an observation made by Jakaza (2020) that identities constructed on online communities are obfuscated rather than real and stable. The current study reveals that identities constructed on WhatsApp through usernames are real and stable.

The current study found that people use usernames as linguistic resources to construct and display their identities in online communities such as WhatsApp. This is aptly supported by findings from previous studies conducted by Bechar-Israeli (1995), Gatson (2011), Hassa (2012), and Subrahmanyam, Greenfield and Tynes (2004). These studies confirm that people in online communities rely on their usernames to couch an identity for themselves. These identities may portray the person's religion, gender, sports, family, group affiliation, music or sports.

The findings from the study aligns with the tenets of naming and identity theory that people use action, interaction and the creation of images of the self to explore their identities in certain context of the world. This shows that individuals create identities that are prolong and relevant to them in different interactions and that usernames are used by people to index a certain social positioning because usernames become iconic with certain social attributes, values and groups.

The findings of the current study also align with the tenets of symbolic interactionism in the sense that individuals use significant symbols, in this case usernames, to communicate with others during their interactions. These

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significant symbols are used to create their identities during the interactions. The findings from my study also point to the fact that self presentation is done every day by people in the online space just as Goffman theorised many years ago.

Chapter Summary

The chapter analysed and discussed the categories of WhatsApp usernames as used by some University of Cape Coast students, the factors that influenced their choice and the identities encapsulated in such usernames.

The study revealed that there were four main categories of usernames. These were real names only, real names and nicknames, nicknames only, and emojis. The researcher found that real names used as usernames came in varied forms. These forms were first names only, first name and surname, day name and first name, surname only, modified first name, and initialised name. With regards to the use of nickname as WhatsApp usernames, the researcher identified that such names were names of footballers, title of songs, bible characters, historic personalities, historic people, musicians, movie characters, academic title, academic title and a nickname, and a concept related to the self or the person's philosophy.

Several factors influenced the choice of the usernames used by the participants. The researcher observed that the desire to be easily identified by one's contacts, to disguise one's self, to reflect the character of a personality, and to reflect current happenings in one's environment were the factors that necessitated the choice of the usernames.

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Finally, the researcher found that usernames used by participants were deliberately chosen to reflect their identities. Among these identities were religious identity, music identity, academic identity, institutional or group affiliation identity, family identity, football identity and self-identity.

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CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This final chapter is in five sections. In the first section, I present a summary of the entire study. This is followed by key findings from the study. In the third section, the conclusions drawn from the findings from the study are also presented. In the section that follows, the implications of the study for theory and practice are presented. In the final section, recommendations for further studies are suggested.

Summary of the Study

The researcher sought to investigate the kinds of identity constructed through the choice of WhatsApp usernames by some UCC students. The attempt to find an answer to the problem understudy which was how usernames were used as a linguistic resource to construct identities in an online space were premised on the following research questions:

1. What are the categories of username of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?
2. What factors influence the choice of usernames of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?
3. What kinds of identity are constructed through the usernames of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?

To find answers to the above questions, the researcher employed the qualitative research approach, focusing on the use of the netnography design as propounded by Kozinets (2010). Qualitative data were gathered in two phases. The first phase of gathering qualitative data was done through

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observation. Here, the usernames of some University of Cape Coast students were observed by me for a period of three months. After that, I took screenshots of usernames found on the WhatsApp platform. This was followed up by the second phase. In the second phase, data was gathered through semi-structured interview. The population of the study was 138. However, only 64 could be reached for the interview. Frequencies and percentages were used to present the results on the categories of usernames. The inductive thematic analysis approach was also used to analyse data on the factors that influenced the choice of participants' usernames and the identities constructed through the usernames.

Rheingold's concept of virtual community, symbolic interactionism and Goffman's concept presentation of self in everyday life, and naming and identity theory by Aldrin served as the conceptual and theoretical frameworks for the study. The concept of virtual community helped the researcher to view people on WhatsApp as forming a community of practice with specific attention on the naming practices of the virtual community. The framework also helped the researcher to understand how as a virtual community, people belonging to such communities relied on usernames as linguistic device to construct their identities to others in the same community.

Key Findings

This section presents a summary of the key findings of the study based on the results and discussion of the data gathered. The findings are presented according to the research questions formulated for the study.

Research question 1: What are the categories of username of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?

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The purpose of this research question was to seek and have an idea about the categories of username that UCC first year students use on their WhatsApp platform. Data analysed revealed that there were four main categories of usernames. These were real names only, real names and nicknames, nicknames only, and emojis. The researcher found that real names used as usernames came in varied forms. These forms were first names only, first name and surname, day name and first name, surname only, modified first name and initialised name. With regards to the use of nickname as WhatsApp usernames, the researcher identified that such names were names of footballers, title of songs, bible characters, historic personalities and historic people, musicians, movie characters, academic titles, academic title plus nickname, and a concept related to the self.

Research question 2: What factors influence the choice of usernames of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?

The second research question was formulated to ascertain the factors that influenced the choice of WhatsApp usernames by the participants. The analysed data showed that several factors influenced the choice of the usernames used by the participants. The researcher observed that the desire to be easily identified by one's contacts, to disguise oneself, to reflect current happenings in one's environment, and to reflect the character of a personality and also to show future ambitions were the factors that necessitated the choice of the usernames.

Research question 3: What kinds of identity are constructed through the usernames of University of Cape Coast students on WhatsApp?

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The purpose of this research question was to ascertain the kinds of identity constructed through the choice of usernames. The researcher found that usernames used by participants were deliberately chosen to reflect their identities. Among these identities were religious identity, music identity, academic identity, institutional or group affiliation identity, family identity, football identity and self-identity.

Conclusions

From the key findings from the study, the following conclusions can be made in relation to the research questions of the study. First of all, it can be concluded that the kinds of name used by students on their WhatsApp are similar to those in offline settings. This means that online naming practices are not entirely different from offline naming practices. However, in the online settings, people have the affordance of selecting from symbols known as emojis and attaching them to their usernames to communicate to other people in the same setting. It can also be concluded that for every name used on WhatsApp, whether real official names or nicknames, or even symbols in the form of emojis, there are hidden factors that influence the people to choose such names. This means that usernames used on WhatsApp usernames are not arbitrary labels as some have suggested (van der Nagel, 2017). It can also be concluded from the findings of this study that usernames, just like most names used in the offline traditional setting, serve as linguistic resources in the online space for the construction of individuals' identities. This is because usernames selected evoke certain set of attributes about the bearer of such names.

A conclusion is also drawn that symbols in the form of emojis selected to be used in the place of username are also important means through which

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identities of individual in the virtual community of practice are constructed and displayed. Identities constructed by these usernames are for self representation and self-promotion. Finally, it can be concluded that WhatsApp is perceived by people as another world/community/society where practices that exist in the offline traditional world/community/society can be transported to and lived. This is evident from the study as participants indicated that they chose their usernames to communicate to other people in their WhatsApp community.

Implications of the Study

This section presents the implications of the study based on the findings and conclusions of the current study. The study has both research, theoretical and methodological implications.

The current study makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on identity construction in general and identity construction through usernames in online social media networking sites in particular. Though some studies have been conducted on online social media network sites such as WhatsApp, not many have given attention to how names are used as vehicles of identity construction among university students in Ghana in this era of technology. This work therefore opens up the space for other researchers interested in similar study to use this study as a point of reference.

In terms of practice, the study also has some bearing. The study makes it important for people on social media network platforms to note that usernames serve as key linguistic resource for communication. And whether implicit or explicit, attention must be given to the usernames they encounter in their everyday life in the online spaces as these names may be giving an

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information about a contact in their circle of life in the digital world. It also informs them that usernames they use on their social networking sites must be censored as other people may read many meanings into some names they may select for themselves in such online spaces (Kutor, 2017) which may deviate from the intended meaning.

The study also has some theoretical implications. The study adds to the call made by Coker (2011) to ground theoretical concepts such as virtual community of practice in mainstream linguistics. Applying the concept of virtual community of practice gave the researcher the wherewithal to see WhatsApp as made of people forming a community and sharing common practices. In other words, the researcher was able to understand the relationship between an online community and identity. This means that linguists who seek to understand the use of language in computer mediated communication and how language is used to construct identity in virtual community have the concept of virtual community of practice at their disposal.

The study also made an effort to test the naming and identity theory postulated by Aldrin. Through the lens of this theory, the researcher was able to identify the kinds of identity constructed by usernames and made significant in a particular context—in this case, the online social network context. Though originally propounded for the offline setting to find how naming and identity construction form a symbiotic relationship, the theory has successfully been employed in the online setting. The theory can therefore be used by other researchers to conduct naming and identity studies in the online space. This can also be said about symbolic interactionism and Goffman's concept of presentation in everyday life.

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The study also has research methodological implication. Netnography as a qualitative research design has proven useful in the study of a group of people forming a community with similar social and cultural practices. Together with the concept of virtual community and the theory of naming and identity, this has enabled the researcher to better understand and describe a particular behaviour in the form of naming and identity construction of a group of people in the online space. This has set forth the space for future researchers wanting to embark on a similar trajectory to also test this qualitative research design in the same or other online social media networks.

Suggestions for Future Research

The study examined the categories of username, factors that influenced the choice of a username and the kinds of identity constructed through usernames by some University of Cape Coast students. Based on the findings and implications of the study, the researcher makes recommendation for future studies. A future research on how sociolinguistic variables such as sex, age, educational level and social status influence the choice of a person's name on WhatsApp and other social networking sites will prove useful.

Again, a recommendation is made for further study into the usernames of the entire undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast since this study focused on a rather few usernames of students of the University of Cape Coast. This will help make a generalisation on the naming practices of UCC students on WhatsApp.

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A study on usernames of undergraduate students, postgraduate students and the staff of UCC can be conducted to find if there are any variations in the naming practices of these groups, and how each group use their usernames on WhatsApp to construct and manage their identities.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

SECTION A

1. For how long have you used your current username?
2. Do you frequently change your username?
3. If, yes, what makes you change your username?
4. If no, what makes you not to change your username frequently?

SECTION B

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CHOICE OF USERNAMES

5. What is/are the factor/s that influenced your choice of your current username?

SECTION C

KINDS OF IDENTITY

6. Does your username contain any aspect of yourself?
7. What aspect of yourself, does it contain, if yes?
8. Does the username contain nay message which you wish to communicate to other people on the platform?

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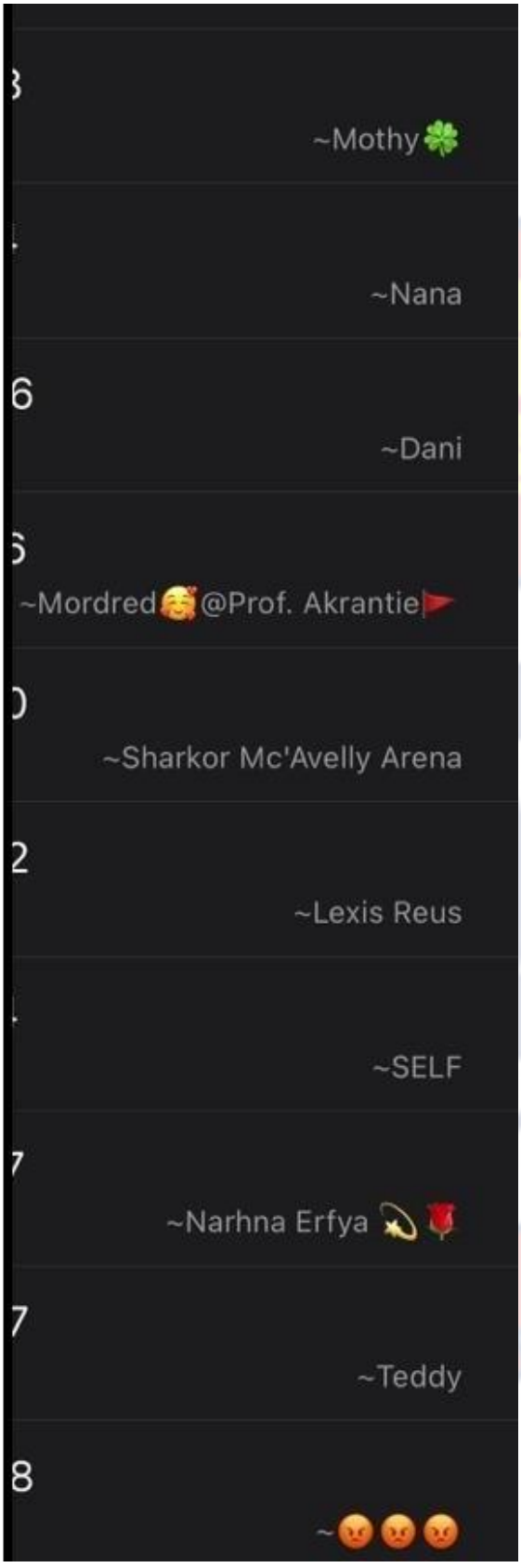
APPENDIX B: SCREENSHOTS OF SOME USERNAMES



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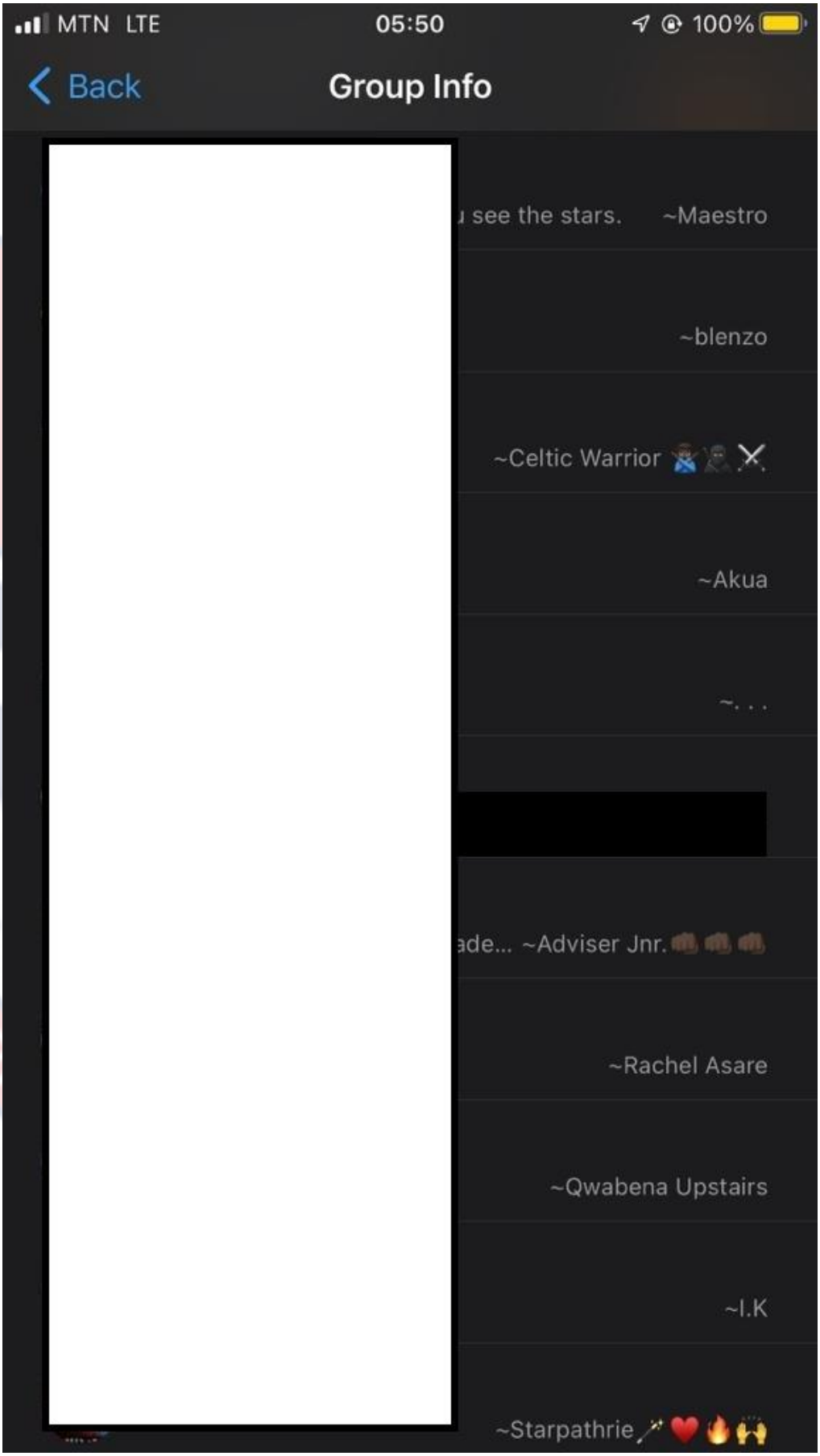

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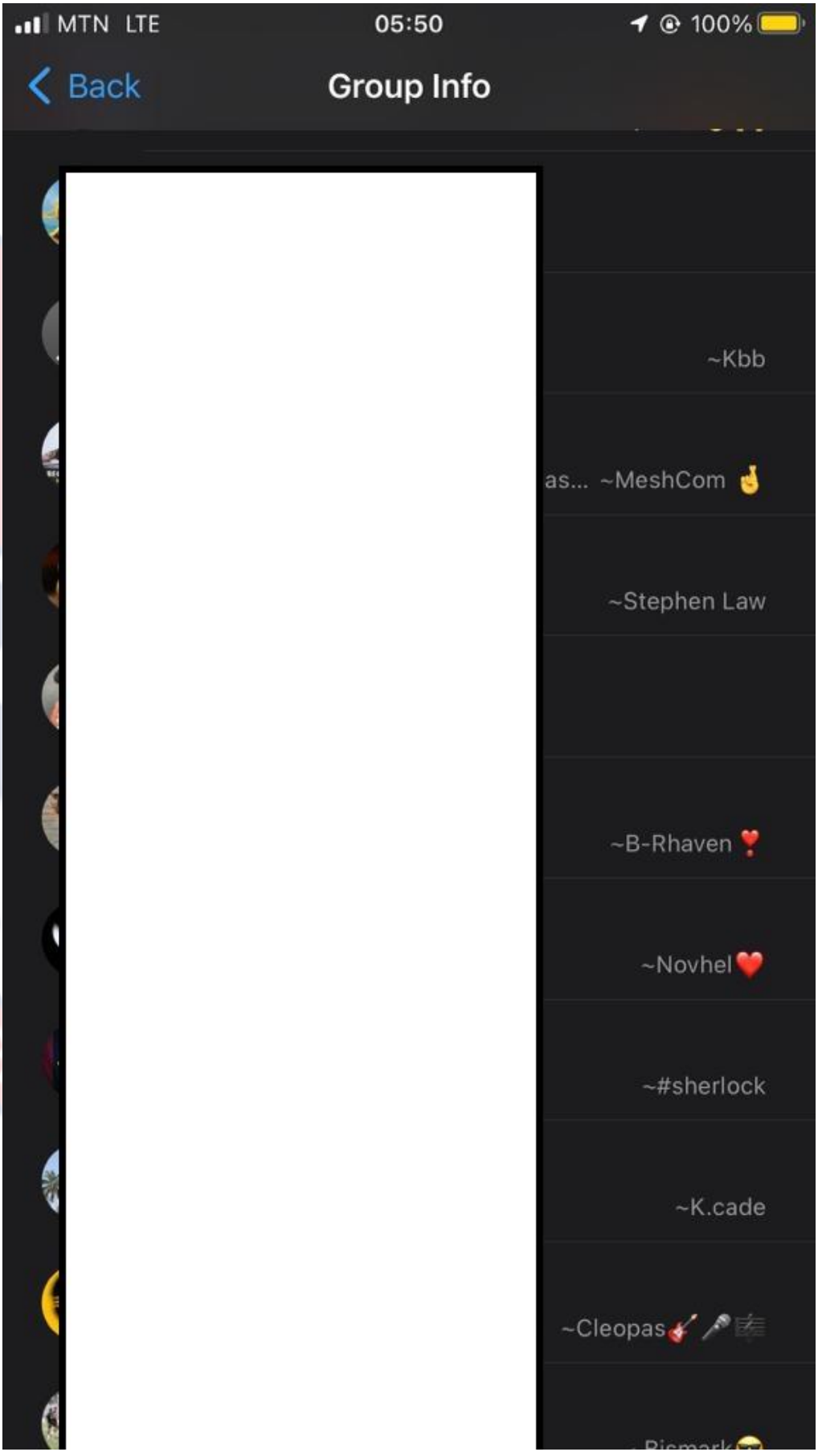

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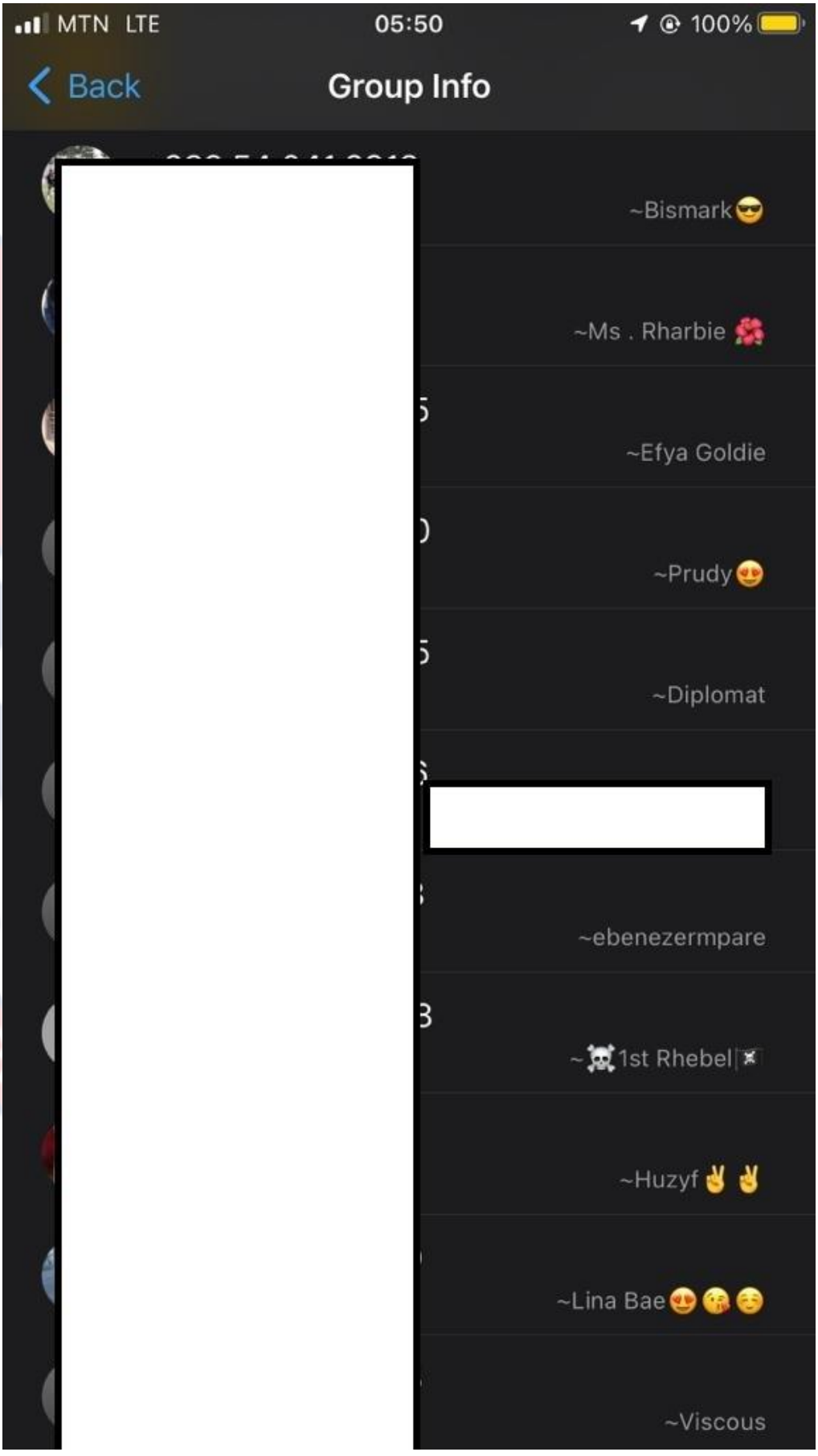

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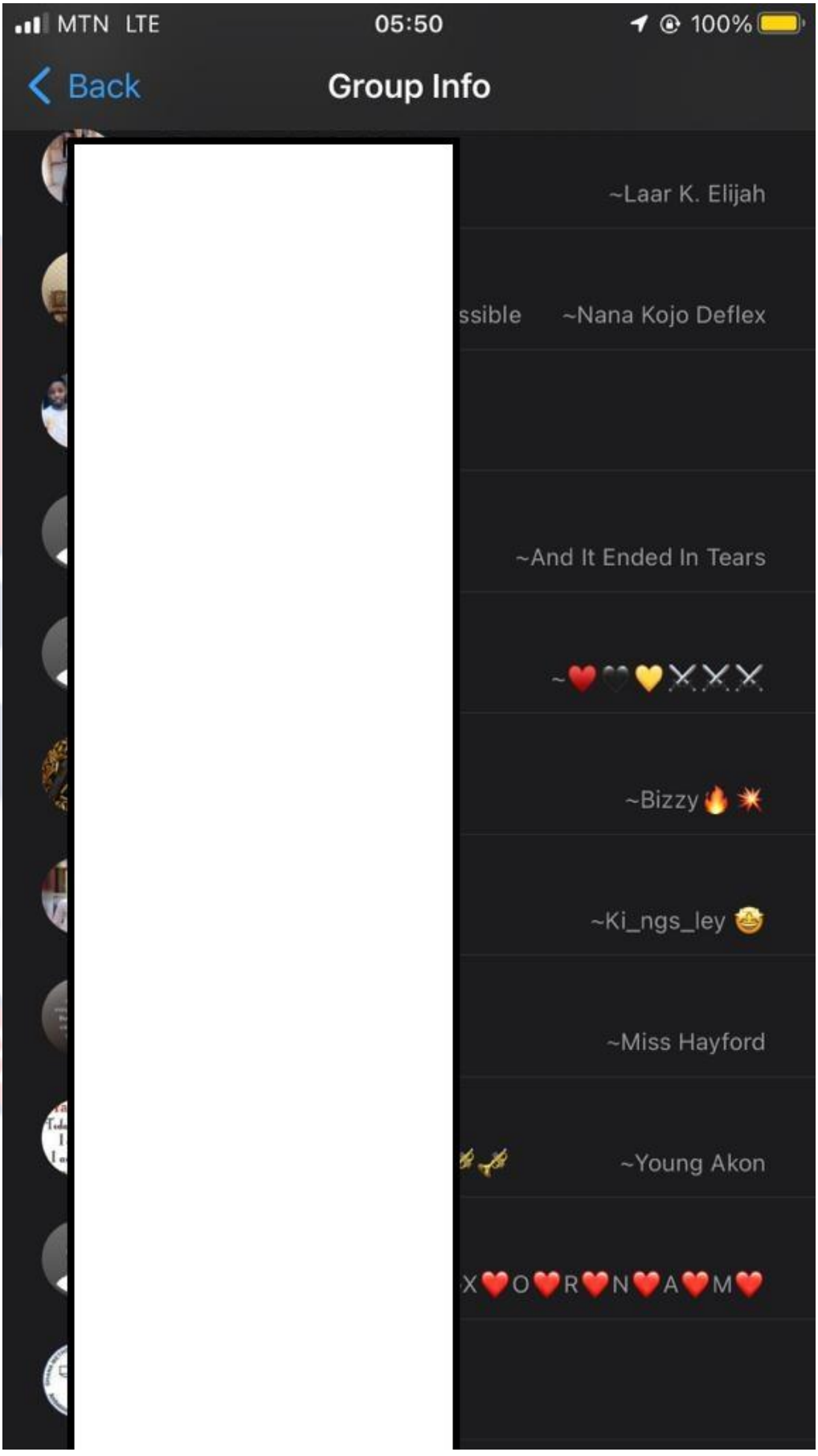

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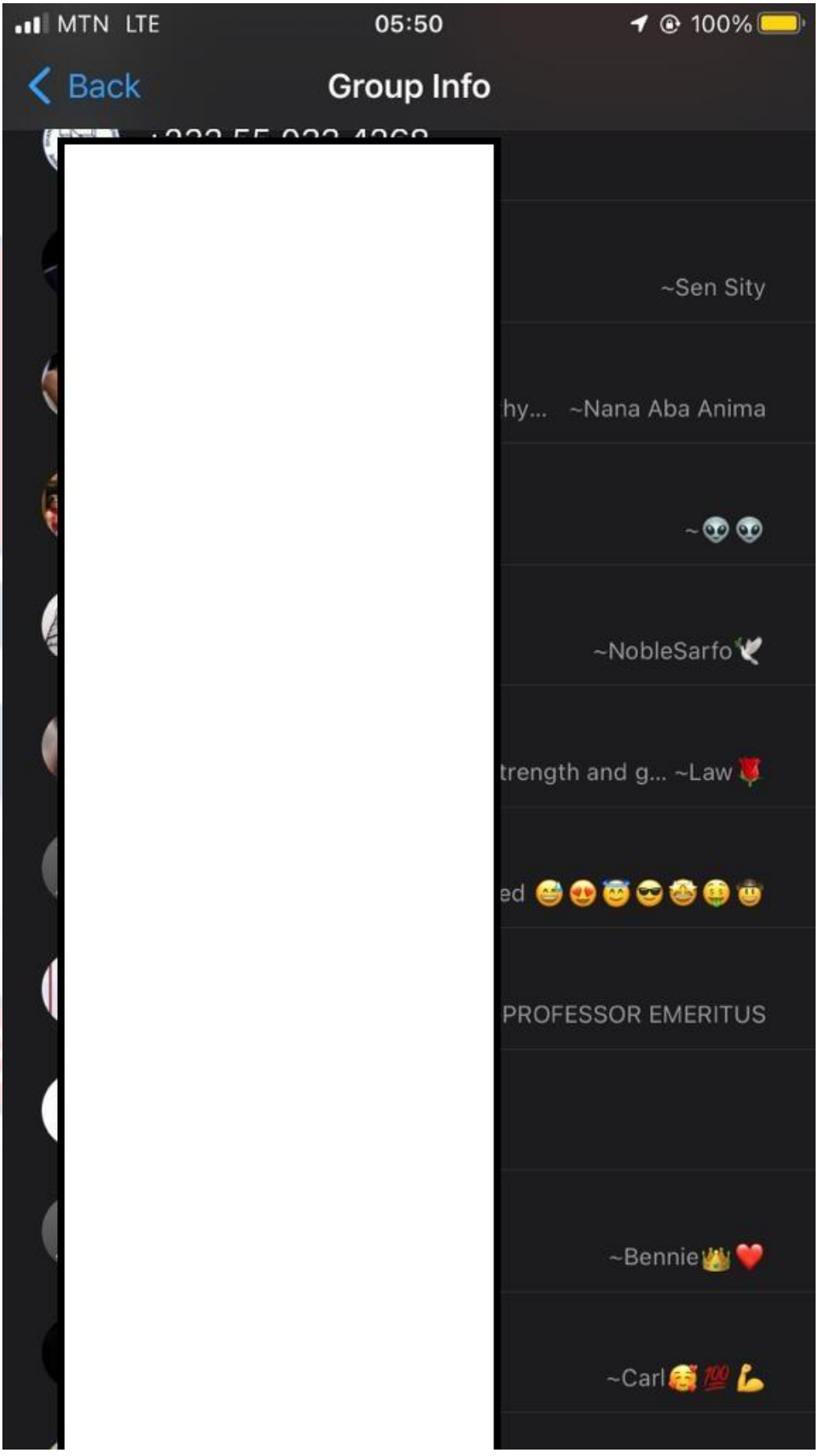

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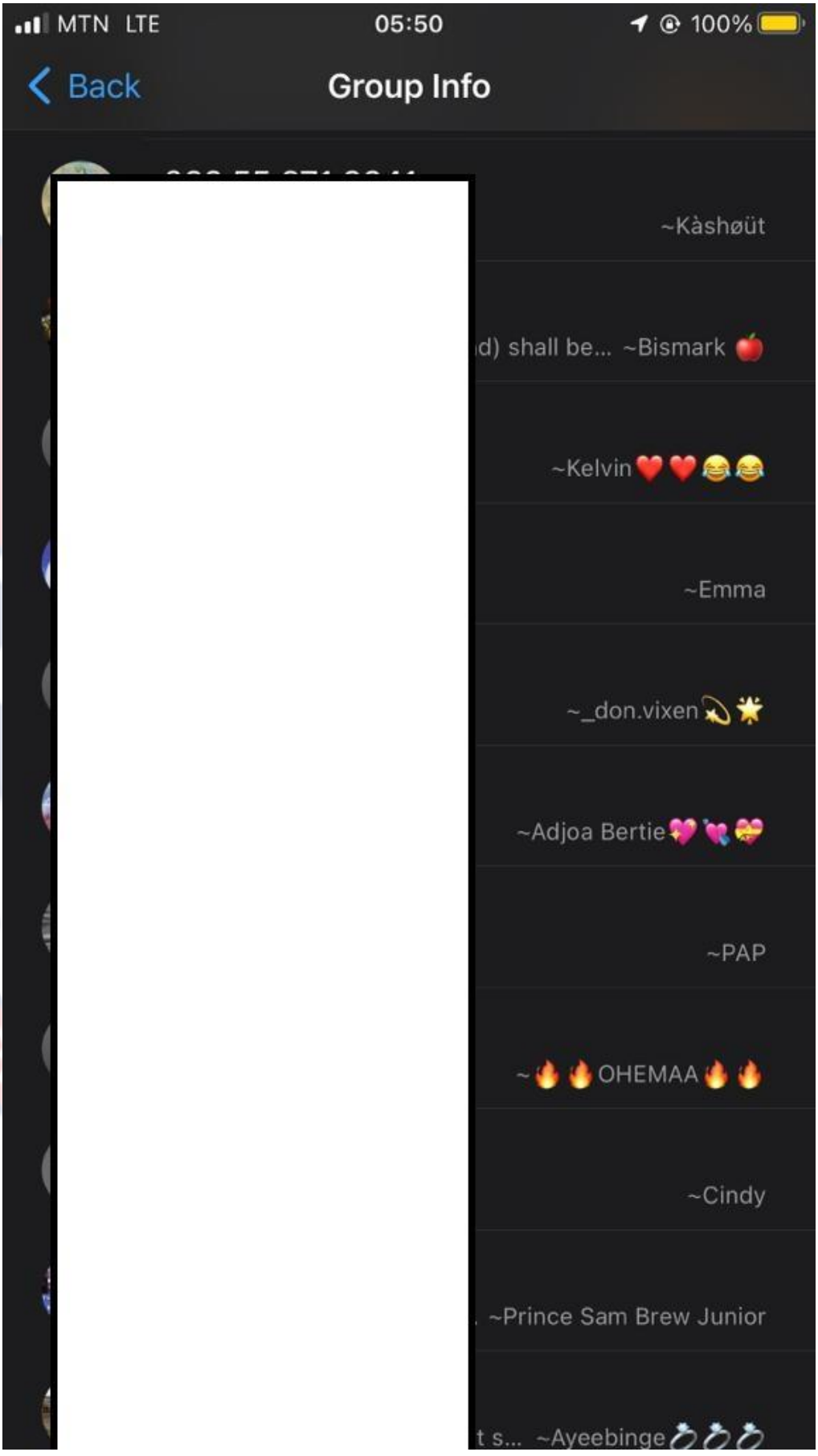

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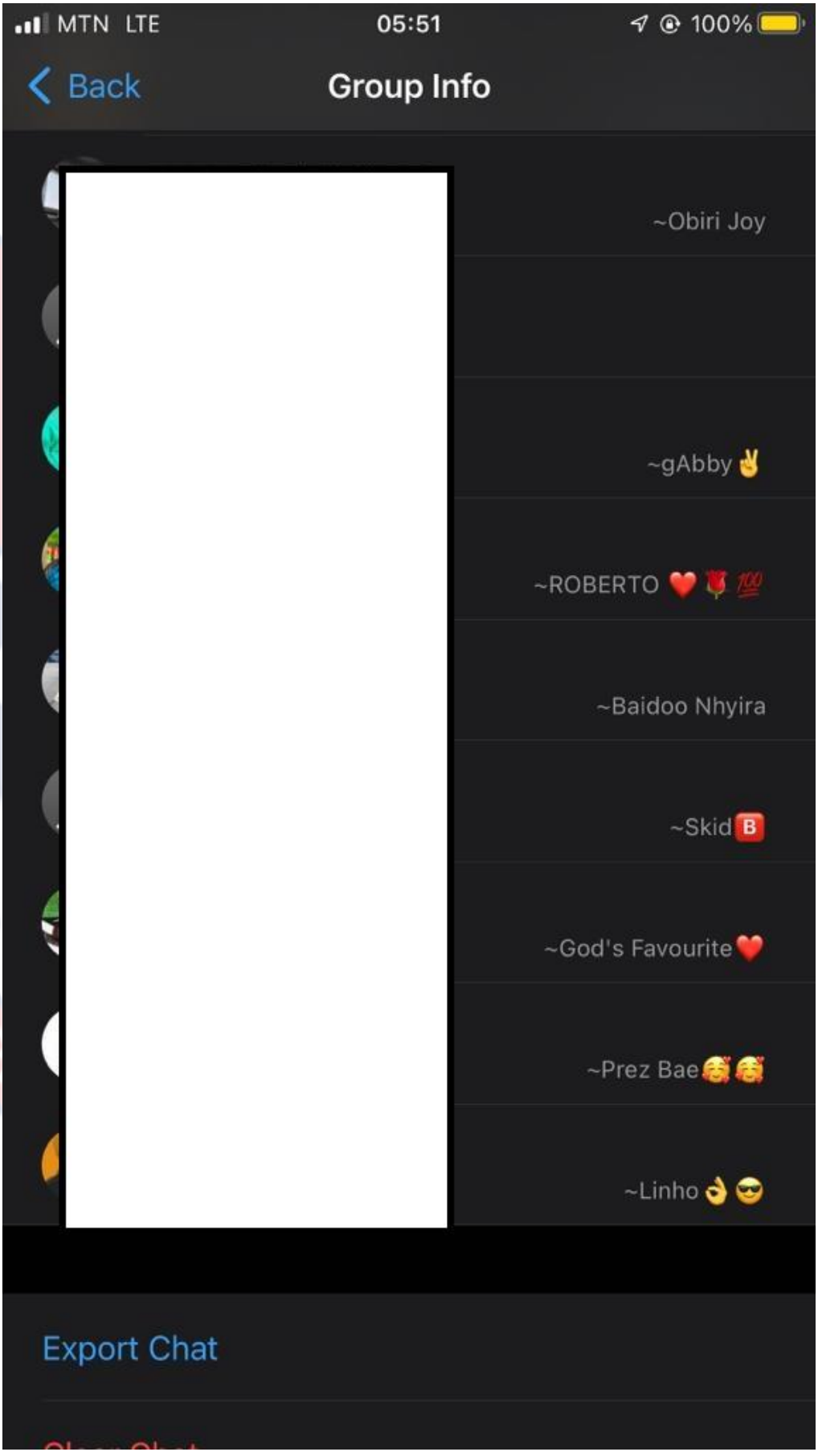

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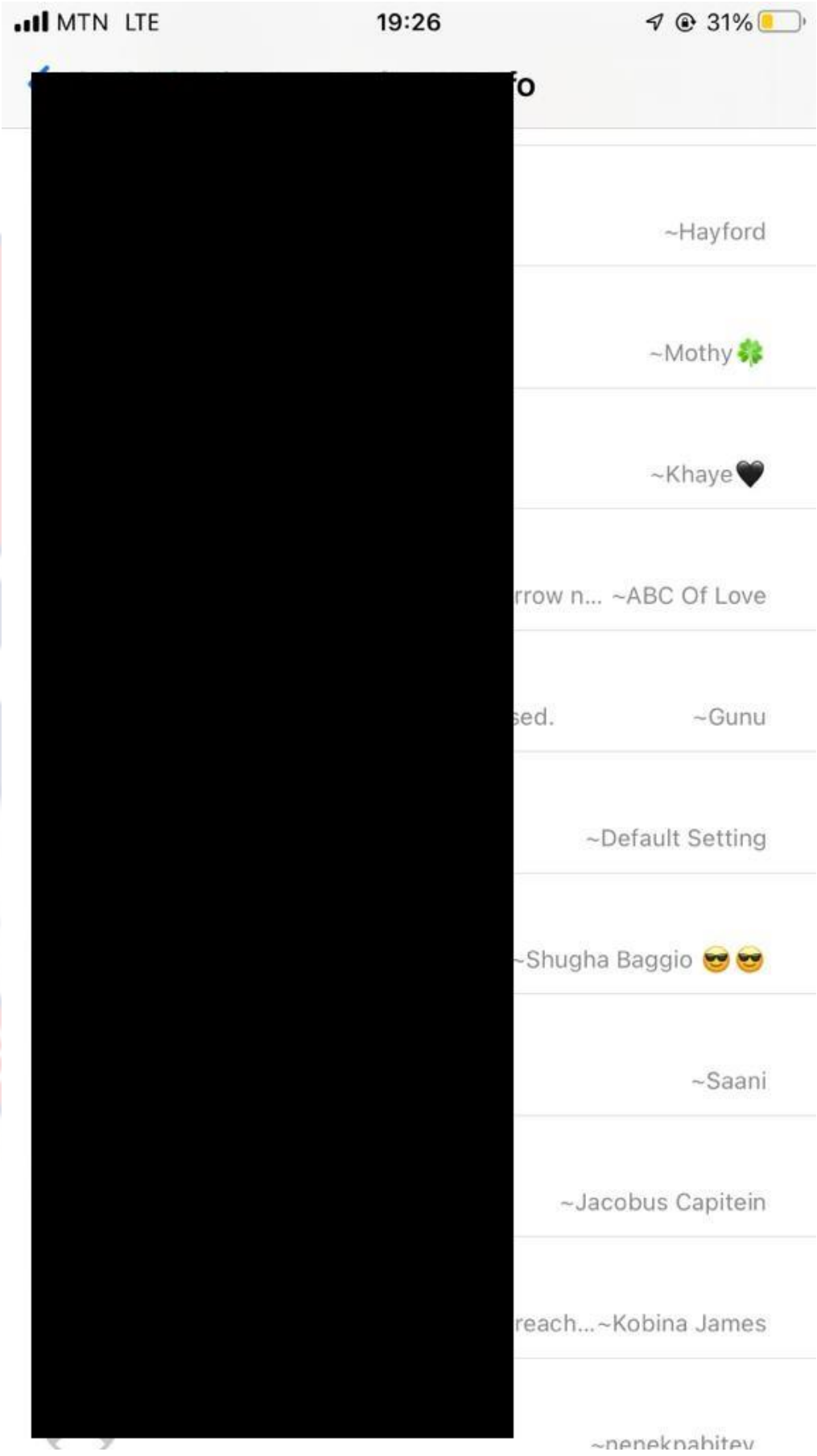

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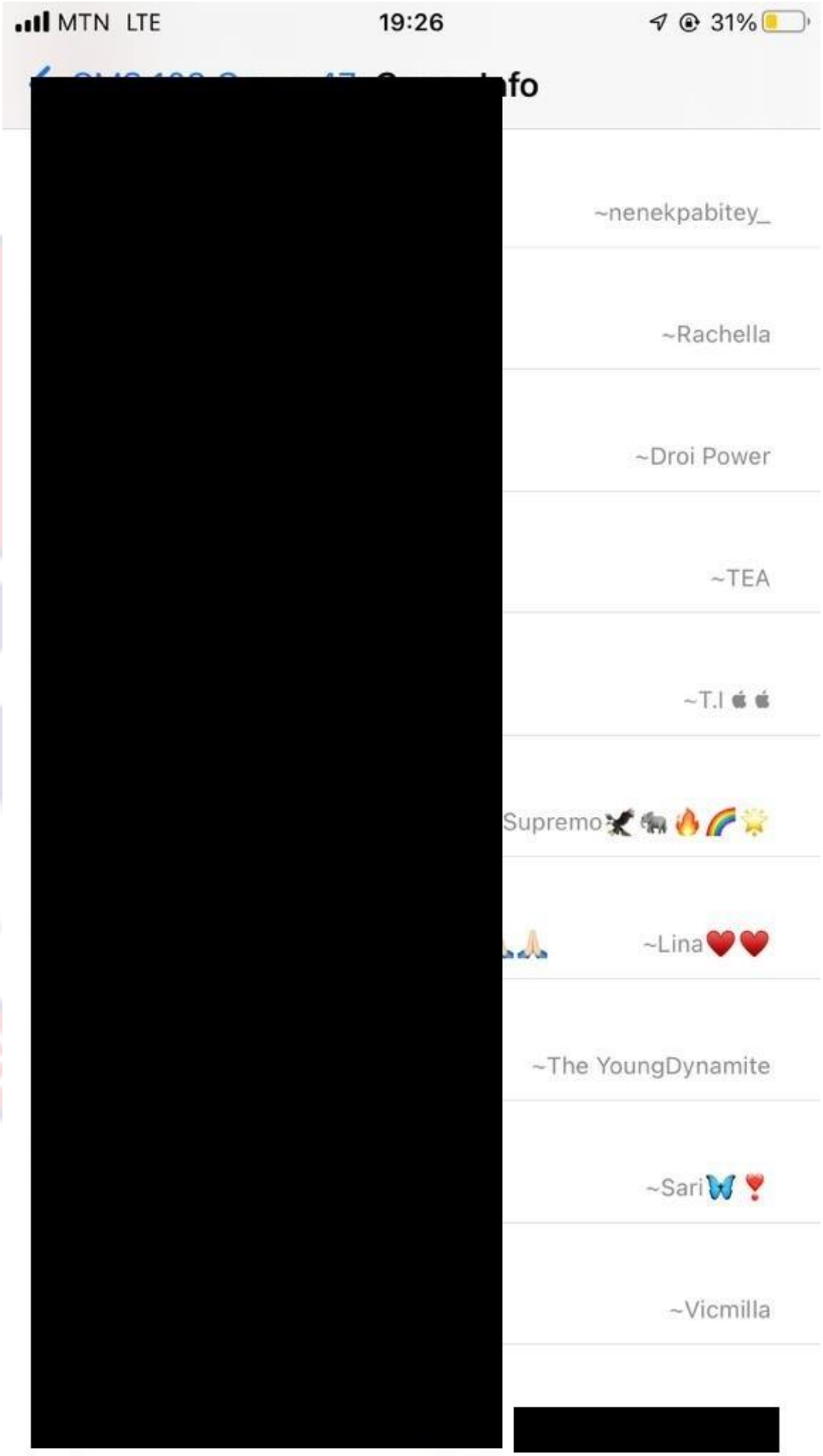

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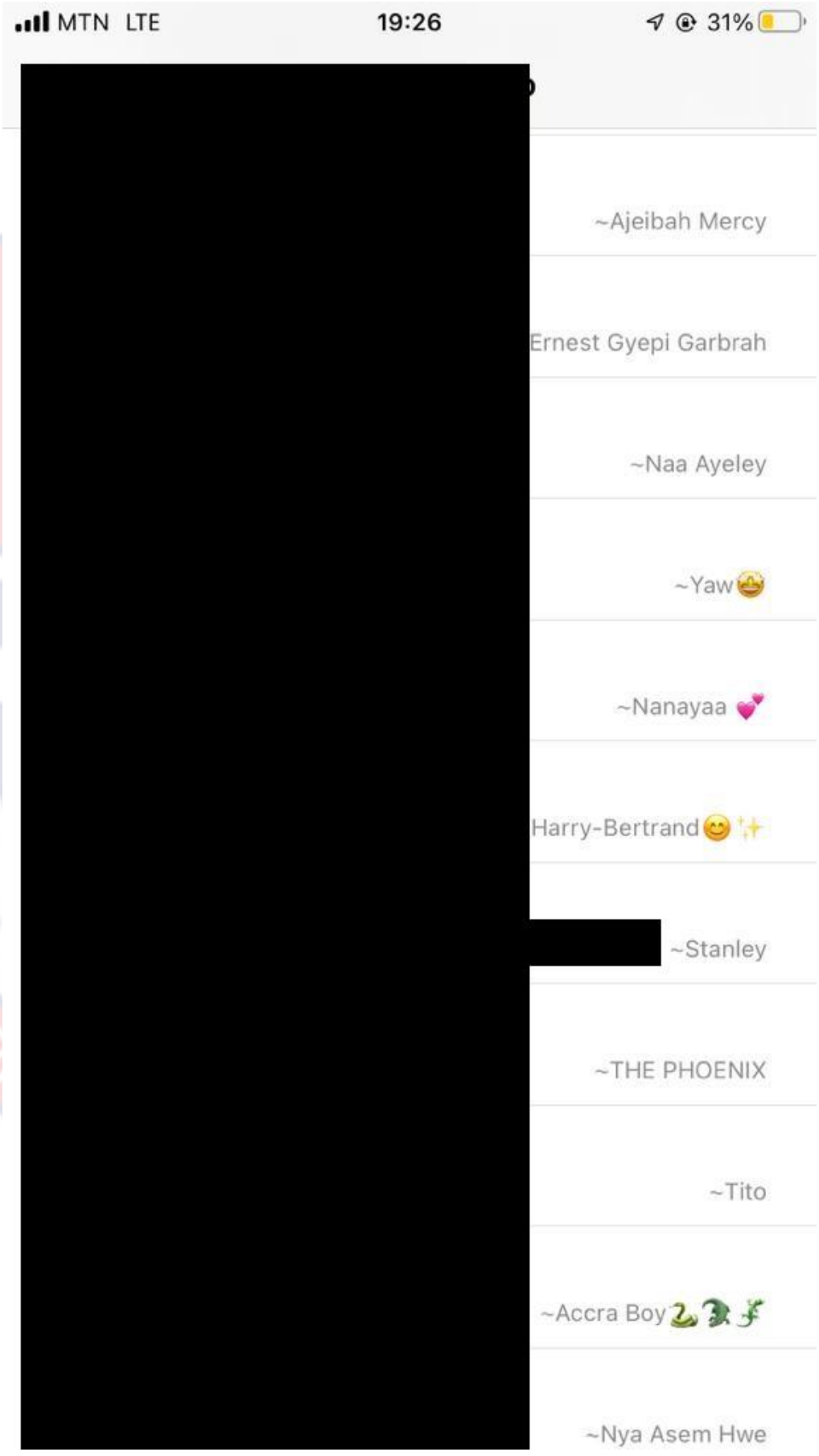

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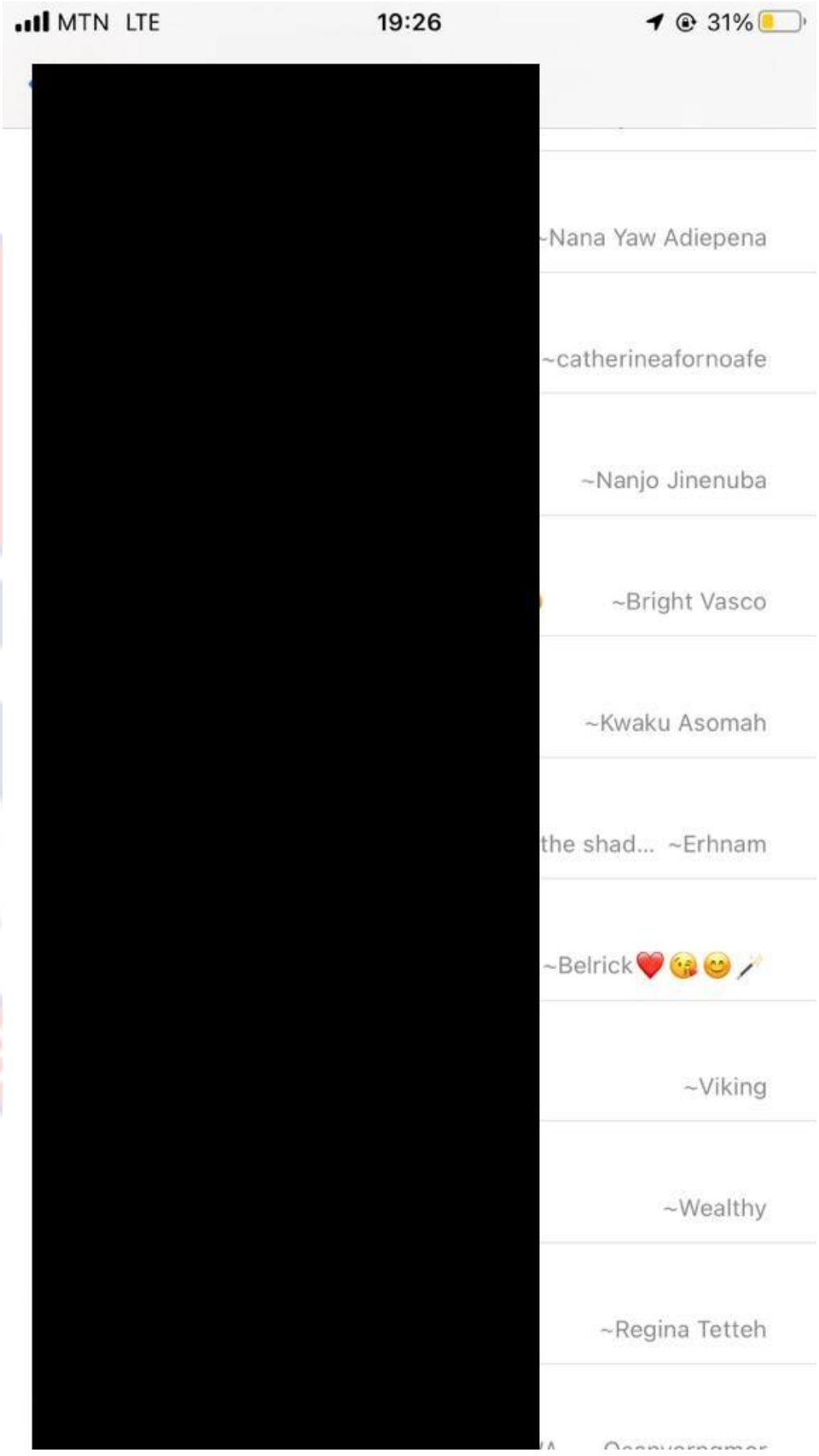

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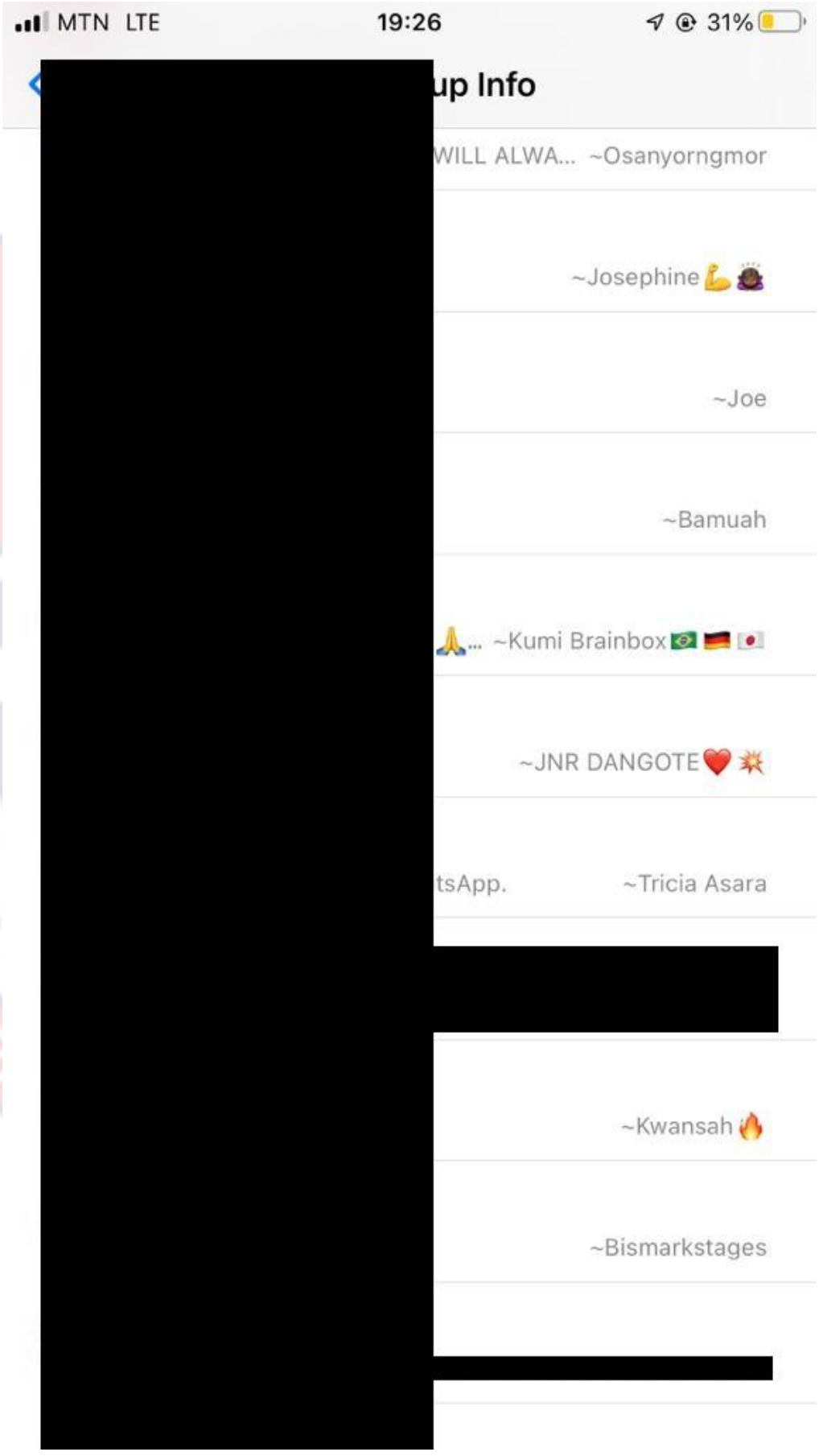

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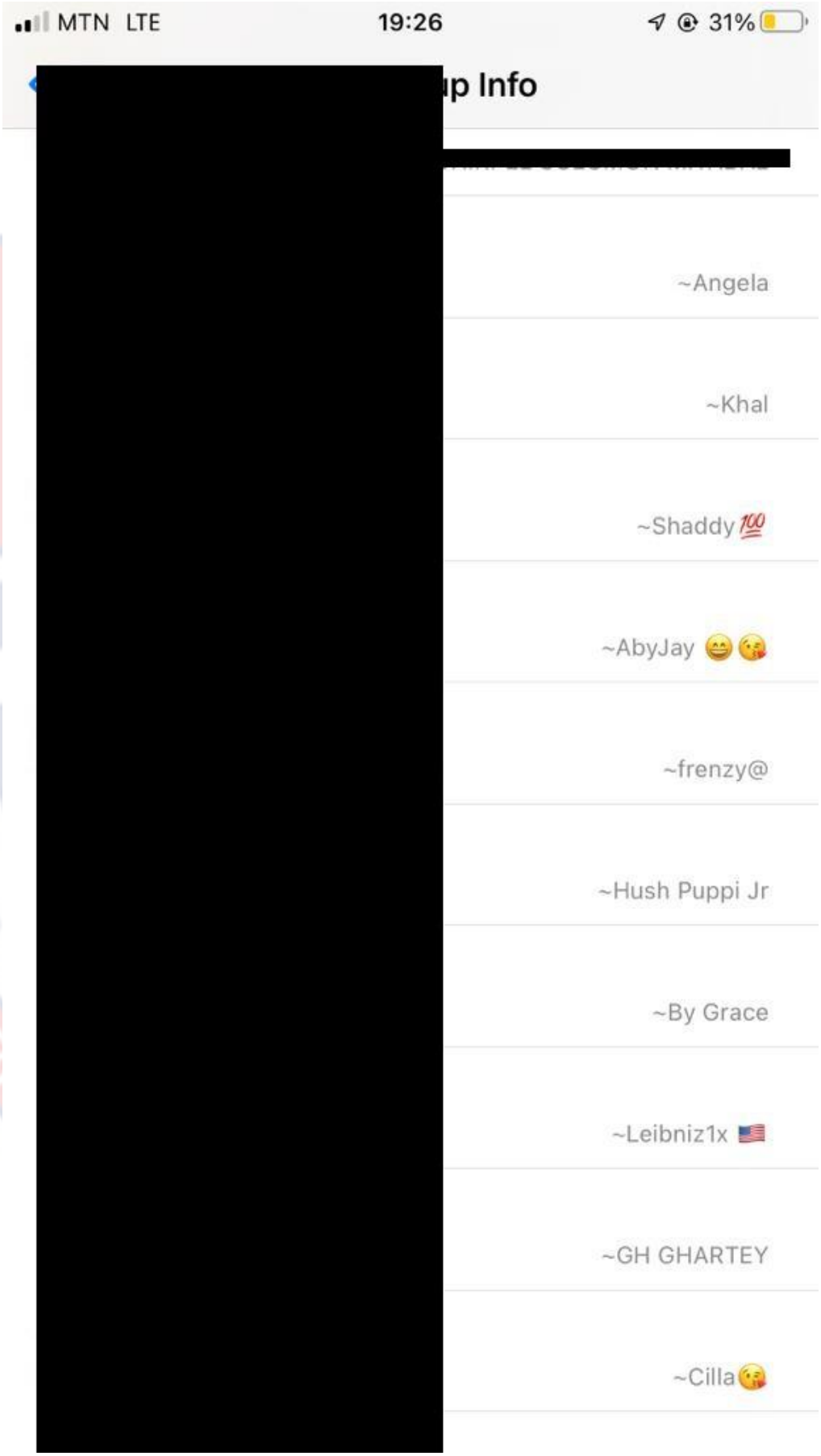

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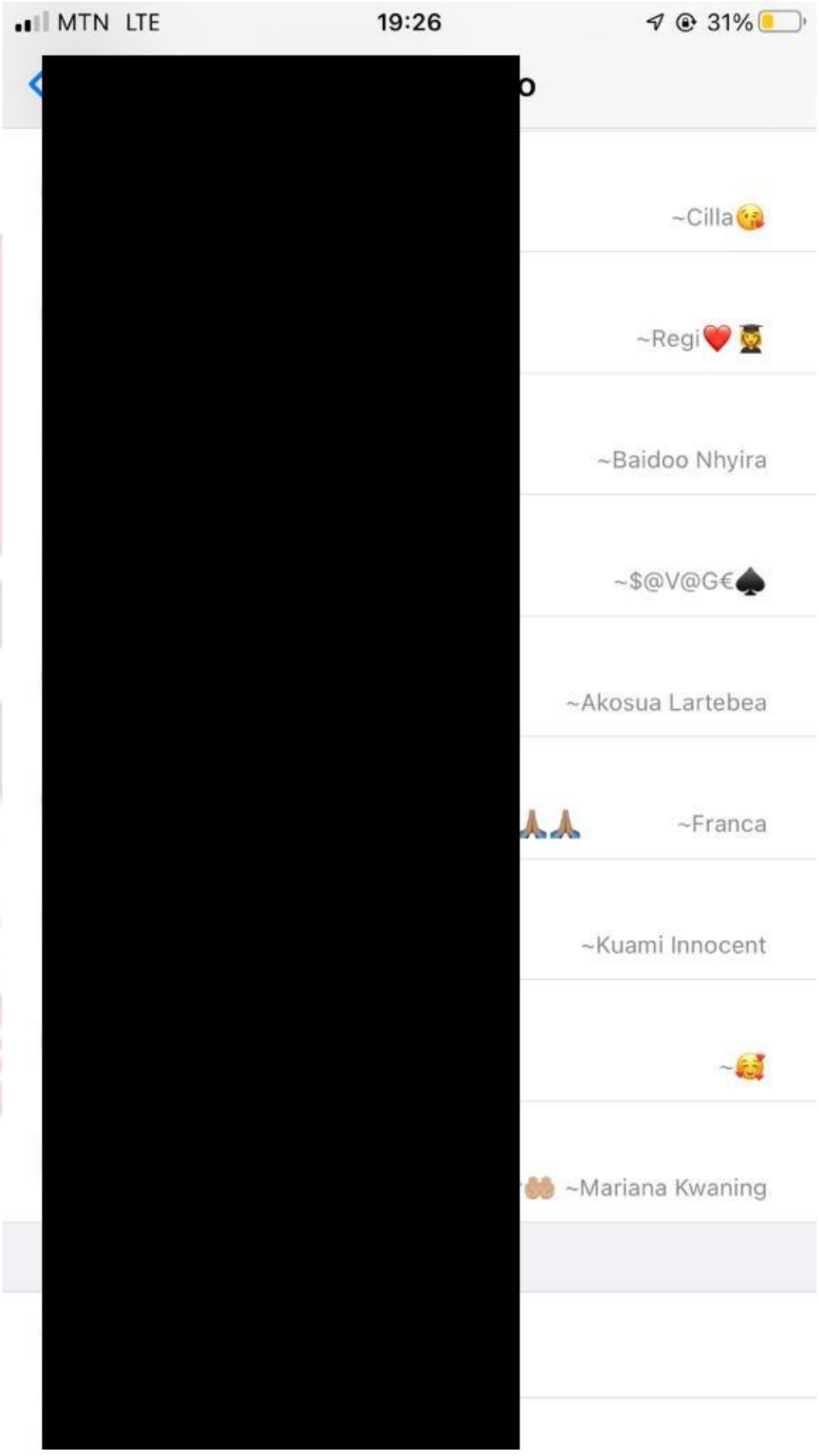

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APPENDIX C: ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD SECRETARIAT
TEL: 0558093143 / 0508878309
E-MAIL: irb@ucc.edu.gh
OUR REF: UCC/IRB/A/2016/1051
YOUR REF:
OMB NO: 0990-0279
IORG #: IORG0009096

12TH AUGUST, 2021

Mr. Charles Larbi Ampofo
Department of English
University of Cape Coast

Dear Mr. Ampofo,

ETHICAL CLEARANCE – ID (UCCIRB/CHLS/2021/05)

The University of Cape Coast Institutional Review Board (UCCIRB) has granted Provisional Approval for the implementation of your research titled **Usernames of Ghanaians on Social Media Networks: A Socio-onomastic Study.** This approval is valid from 12th August, 2021 to 11th August, 2022. You may apply for a renewal subject to submission of all the required documents that will be prescribed by the UCCIRB.

Please note that any modification to the project must be submitted to the UCCIRB for review and approval before its implementation. You are required to submit periodic review of the protocol to the Board and a final full review to the UCCIRB on completion of the research. The UCCIRB may observe or cause to be observed procedures and records of the research during and after implementation.

You are also required to report all serious adverse events related to this study to the UCCIRB within seven days verbally and fourteen days in writing.

Always quote the protocol identification number in all future correspondence with us in relation to this protocol.

Yours faithfully,

Samuel Asiedu Owusu, PhD
UCCIRB Administrator

ADMINISTRATOR
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

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