

# **Social Media Pseudonymity: Affordances, Practices, Disruptions**

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## Abstract

Discussions around anonymity in social media tend to centre on themes of freedom versus harm, as anonymous people can communicate with few consequences, but anonymity can also be an element in harassment and abuse.

Anonymity is rarely found within social media platforms that require personal information like email addresses and usernames. This thesis argues that anonymity on social media needs to be reframed as pseudonymity, which is identity work – or the strategic presentation of the self – and involves relationships between affordances, practices, and disruptions.

The term ‘pseudonym’, meaning ‘false name’, dates back to the era of the printing press, as pseudonymity became a way for authors to make decisions about how their texts would be known. On iterations of social media, from bulletin boards to chat rooms to Facebook, pseudonyms are an important part of identity work, which is the process of creating and contextualising a self through actions and representations. Although the early 2010s saw a rise in what Bernie Hogan calls the ‘real-name web’, as a number of platforms demanded that people use their real names, pseudonymity remains a key practice within social media.

After exploring these historical and contemporary forms of social media pseudonymity, this thesis presents three case studies, each drawing on a different approach to studying social media. I investigate the nymwars, the backlash to Google+’s strict real-name policy, using an affordance approach that interrogates the potential actions that various platforms offer. While platforms value names in particular ways, moving to a practice approach highlights how people negotiate platform features and rules in order to present the identity information they choose. Analysis of pseudonym practices on Reddit Gonewild reveals that people enact playful, sexualised pseudonymous identities on this subreddit. But pseudonym practices can also be disrupted, as the third case study on doxing demonstrates: there is harm in other people discovering and publicising someone’s personal information.

Social media pseudonymity involves contending with networks of people and platforms when engaging in identity work that gives control over, and context to, connections and communication.

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## Declaration

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Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Declaration .....	v
List of Figures .....	ix
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Pseudonymity: Getting beyond anonymity versus real names .....	8
Thesis proposition and research questions .....	10
Context of the research .....	11
Names: Signifying connections; asserting control .....	12
Social media: Connecting people; creating data .....	14
In between real names and no names: Different types of pseudonymity .....	18
Methods .....	19
Data collection .....	21
Method: Content analysis .....	22
Ethics .....	23
Thesis outline .....	25
PART 1	
Historical and contemporary forms of pseudonymity .....	29
CHAPTER 1 Pseudonymity history: Authorship, the author-function, and what authors mean for digital texts .....	30
Introduction .....	30
The printing press: Where the author began .....	32
Authorship and pseudonymity .....	33
The author-function .....	36
Pseudonymity and digital texts .....	39
Authorship on social media .....	42
Conclusion .....	44
CHAPTER 2 Identity work from usernames to profiles: the development of social media pseudonymity .....	46
Introduction .....	46
Identity work .....	47
From user numbers to usernames: ARPANET and Unix .....	51
Email .....	52
Bulletin boards: The EIES, Usenet, the WELL, and 4chan .....	54

Chatrooms: AOL and IRC .....	58
Chat programs: MSN Messenger.....	63
Social networking: Facebook, Friendster, Renren, Tencent QQ, and KakaoStory64	
Early social network sites .....	65
Facebook, face-work, giving impressions, and managing regions.....	66
Identity work on global social media .....	68
Conclusion.....	70
CHAPTER 3 Web 2.0 and the real-name web .....	72
Introduction .....	72
Social media shifts with Web 2.0.....	73
The real-name web.....	75
Profiles on Web 2.0 social media .....	79
Resistance to the real name web: Pseudonymous and alternative social media..	82
Social media without names: Pseudonymous platforms .....	83
Social media without commercialisation: Alternative platforms .....	87
Conclusion.....	89
PART 2.....	92
Case studies of pseudonymity affordances, practices, and disruptions .....	92
CHAPTER 4 Pseudonymity as an affordance: People and platforms clash over identity politics in the nymwars .....	93
Introduction .....	93
Affordances.....	95
The nymwars.....	99
Methods and ethics .....	101
Platform walkthrough.....	104
Survey responses: Reflecting on My Name Is Me five years later.....	109
Results of the thematic analysis: Why pseudonyms matter .....	113
Vulnerable groups .....	113
Freedom and choice .....	114
Avoiding data collection .....	115
Context management .....	116
#MyNameIs: The nymwars resurface on Facebook .....	118
Conclusion.....	119
CHAPTER 5 Pseudonymity practices: Faceless bodies on Reddit Gonewild.....	121
Reddit: The platform and its pseudonymous culture.....	122
Platform governance: Policies, rules, Reddiquette, guidelines, and moderation125	

Throwaways.....	128
Verification .....	128
Social media practices.....	130
Reddit Gonewild.....	132
Methods and ethics .....	134
AskReddit posts about Gonewild.....	138
Images and image titles.....	140
Identity signals on Reddit Gonewild .....	144
Survey responses.....	152
Conclusion.....	158
CHAPTER 6 Pseudonymity disrupted: Making forced connections through doxing	161
Introduction .....	161
Unmasking.....	163
Anthropological perspectives on masks and unmasking.....	163
Online pseudonyms as masks .....	166
Doxing .....	168
The human flesh search engine .....	171
Case studies: Grog’s Gamut and Violentacrez .....	173
Grog’s Gamut: The influential political blogger .....	174
Violentacrez: The “biggest troll on the web” .....	175
Methods and ethics .....	176
Results: How were the doxings justified?.....	178
Content analysis: Who deserved to be doxed? .....	179
Forced connections: Using social media to reveal information.....	185
How masks help us understand pseudonyms .....	189
Conclusion.....	191
CONCLUSION Towards an understanding of social media pseudonymity .....	193
Findings .....	194
Ethics.....	198
Limitations and future research.....	199
References.....	202
Appendices.....	228
Appendix A: Guide to social media platforms mentioned in thesis .....	228
Appendix B: Ethics application .....	231



## List of Figures

Figure 1: A screenshot from the 2015 walkthrough.

Figure 2: A screenshot from the 2016 walkthrough.

# INTRODUCTION

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The first step in signing up for a social media site is choosing a name. While this may seem like a straightforward process, this decision is at the centre of politics around identity, agency, and power online. Choosing a name – or choosing not to have a name – is one of the most important negotiations between a person and a platform. It is the beginning of a social media identity, and sets the tone for who controls the content that flows through that site.

Before I examine pseudonymity in more detail, along with the thesis proposition and research questions, I first present some key moments for online anonymity, to establish what's at stake. When anonymity is considered to be a tool for freedom that people sometimes use to harm others, it leads to questions around whether platforms should allow anonymity or not, thereby missing an account of how identities are multifaceted. This introduction covers the context of this research, gives an overview of names, social media, and different types of pseudonymity, details the methods that will be deployed within the three case studies, and provides an outline of the thesis.

Sociologist Gary Marx (1999) identifies several rationales for being anonymous, including self-protection, risk-taking, enhancing games and play, encouraging reporting and information-seeking, and emphasising the content of a message rather than its author. But despite the advantages of letting people choose their own names, anonymity is also complex, contested, and constantly under threat. For Marx:

The question of whether full, last, first, or no name is expected in social settings may appear to be a trivial issue [...] But it is in fact the kind of little detail in which big social meanings may reside (Marx 1999, p. 100).

In 1990s online culture, having the freedom to assume any identity by choosing a username presented people with opportunities to experiment, explore, play, and cause trouble. Despite the potential risks, including harassment and abuse, the inventor of the

World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, was adamant that people should be able to be anonymous online:

People should be able to surf the Web anonymously, or as a well-defined entity, and should be able to control the difference between the two. I would like to be able to decide who I will allow to use my personal information and for what (Berners-Lee 1999, p. 158).

Addressing both the risks and opportunities of anonymity in a 1997 conference, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) put forward four principles, arguing that “the positive values of anonymity more than offset the dangers it presents” (Kling 1999, n.p.):

1. Anonymous communication online is morally neutral;
2. Anonymous communication should be regarded as a strong human right;
3. Online communities should be allowed to set their own policies regarding the use of anonymous communication;
4. Individuals should be informed about the extent to which their identity is disclosed online (Teich et al. 1999).

The principles were meant to establish that anonymity had value, even though these separate principles can sometimes be contradictory: stating that anonymity is a strong human right clashes with the idea that online communities should be allowed to set their own policies regarding anonymous communication, given that any platform can simply ban anonymity. While the conference demonstrated that online anonymity is important, it did not resolve debates around allowing people to be anonymous for social media platforms to come. Two platforms with opposing ideas about anonymity are Facebook (see Appendix A for a guide to social media platforms mentioned in this thesis) and bulletin board 4chan.

When Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg famously claimed that “having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (Zuckerberg in Lovink 2011, p. 41), it was part of a justification for Facebook’s real-name policy. Zuckerberg’s sister, Randi,

Facebook's marketing director, wished to eradicate anonymity on the internet altogether. She asserts that antisocial behaviour is a product of anonymity:

People behave a lot better when they have their real names down ... people hide behind anonymity and they feel like they can say whatever they want behind closed doors (Zuckerberg in Galperin 2011 n.p.).

Julie Zhuo, a product design manager at Facebook, argues in the *New York Times* that online anonymity leads to antisocial behaviour, which "pollutes" online conversations (Zhuo 2010 n.p.). She draws on Plato's parable of the ring of Gyges, which gave its owner the power of invisibility. Plato ([380 BC] 2007) observed that any man who wore the ring would become corrupted by its anonymising force, as people always do wrong when they have the chance. Understanding anonymity as the cause of antisocial behaviour, as the Zuckerbergs do, is an attractive prospect, since this identifies real names as the solution: "Put your name to something and your words are freighted with responsibility" (Adams 2011, n.p.). Unsurprisingly, one site that requires names is Facebook.

Chris Poole, founder of anonymous image board 4chan, disagrees with the Zuckerbergs. 4chan consciously promotes anonymity in its design, as people post under the generic username 'Anonymous' and posts are ephemeral, vanishing from the site as new posts replace them. Poole, who was known only as 'moot' until 2010, claims that "anonymity is authenticity" (Poole in Ewalt 2011, n.p.), and has criticised the Facebook model, which aims to integrate online and offline identities. Poole says: "Mark [has] said that identity is authenticity, that you are online who you are offline, and to have multiple identities is lacking in integrity. I think that's nuts" (Poole in Krotoski 2012 n.p.). In a blog post entitled, 'The anonymity I know', Poole writes:

In many ways [anonymity] provides an accurate representation of who we are ... Anonymity facilitates honest discourse, creates a level playing field for ideas to be heard, and enables creativity like none other (Poole 2014, n.p.).

Poole argues that online identity is not a mirror, reflecting one true self; instead, people are more like diamonds, as their identity is prismatic (Poole in OreillyMedia 2011).

Hogan recognises that the existence of both real-name platforms like Facebook and anonymous ones like 4chan means arguments can be made that either real names or pseudonyms are at the heart of authentic identities. Hogan argues that “by focusing on authenticity, one is implicitly making normative claims about competing spaces as inauthentic” (Hogan 2013, p. 294). José van Dijck (2013a) agrees: the idea that people have one identity is a misconception. van Dijck calls the creation of multiple personas across platforms a powerful identity strategy that warrants more academic investigation, which my thesis addresses by advancing a nuanced idea of social media pseudonymity. Like van Dijck, I understand social media profiles to be sites of negotiation and struggle between people and platforms, rather than a straightforward reflection of one’s identity.

I compare Facebook and 4chan here to give a sense of how ideologies around identity and authenticity can influence platform design, which in turn can suggest or deny options for certain kinds of names. On 4chan, most people post under the generic moniker ‘Anonymous’ followed by a string of characters. This platform feature was later drawn on to name a decentralised group of pranksters that became an international activist movement: they called themselves Anonymous, a collective invested in garnering media attention. Jason Jarvis (2016) calls Anonymous a meme-complex shared by individuals and networks, arguing that the group draws its power from its highly adaptable visual content. Even if someone is criticising their messages, they become part of Anonymous just by circulating them, Jarvis claims. Media coverage and memes only serve to further legitimise the group. Anthropologist Gabriella Coleman (2014a) has studied Anonymous for years, documenting the group as they matured from online pranksters into a serious political movement, one with a spirit of humour, irreverence, and anti-celebrity, most active when defending values associated with the internet, like opposition to censorship. Not everyone without a name on social media is part of Anonymous, or espouses its values: pranking, protesting, and trolling<sup>1</sup> are just some of the outcomes of withholding identity information while communicating.

Coleman is, unsurprisingly for a researcher with an in-depth knowledge of an anonymous group, an advocate for anonymity. When the *New York Times* hosted a

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Donath (1999) explains that trolling involves baiting someone for an ensuing fight, drawing from a Usenet post that relates the term to fishing culture: dragging bait behind a boat and waiting for a bite. ‘Trolling’ is a term applied to a range of online communication, including harassment, abuse, bullying, and general mischief (Leaver 2013).

debate called *The War Against Online Trolls*, asking, “does anonymity on the web give people too much license to heckle and torment others?”, Coleman (2014b) wrote a piece entitled ‘Anonymity serves us all’, arguing that public good can come when people are able to hide their identity and, at its best, anonymity puts the attention on the message, rather than the messenger. She was joined by a number of other debaters. Some, like Ryan Milner (2014), argue that trolling has value when it facilitates voice, satire, or play, but Kristy Tillman (2014) argues that marginalised groups are often the biggest targets of anonymous trolling, and that social ills are exacerbated when people are not held accountable for their actions. Linking anonymity directly with harassment and abuse, even if it is framed as a debate in which no clear solutions are proposed, is part of a broader discourse of concern that anonymity leads to negativity online. As developments in media production and dissemination have introduced new opportunities and problems for public participation, some news websites are struggling with an influx of aggressive and rude comments on articles, and have considered anonymity to be its source.

Since August 2013, American news blog *Huffington Post* has required anyone posting a comment on their articles to do so under their real name (Darrow 2013). Several other news websites have a similar policy: the banning of anonymity on these sites is intended to promote civility in discussions, based on a perception of anonymous comments as largely containing rude or offensive remarks, illustrated when *Huffington Post* founder Arianna Huffington justified her decision by claiming that the policy would stop harassers from “hiding behind anonymity” (Borchers 2013 n.p.). Managing editor Jimmy Soni claims that “comment sections can degenerate into some of the darkest places on the Internet ... words in online forums and social networks have real power to wound” (Soni 2013, n.p.). Other online commentators criticise the move. Joanna Geary from the *Guardian* admits that there has been a problem with journalists receiving threats and abuse, but argues that insisting on real names is not an adequate solution. The *Huffington Post*’s ban on anonymous comments sparked a wider conversation about whether people should have the right to be anonymous online at all, with commentator Guy Clapperton (2013) arguing that anonymity can lead to bullying, self-harm, and even suicide, while Andrea Kate believes the *Huffington Post* is unfairly punishing “good, honest people who want to have their say without being identified” (Kate 2013, p. 32). The focus of debates about the right to online anonymity is whether or not anonymity is related to inflammatory or abusive behaviour.

Within these debates about anonymity, issues pertaining to gender relations have also surfaced, emphasising power imbalances relevant to how people negotiate naming rules across platforms. A particularly aggressive saga of gendered abuse came to a head in 2014, when the so-called ‘Gamergate’ backlash against women participating in video game culture involved outbreaks of concentrated social media harassment for outspoken women in the industry.<sup>2</sup> Social media harassment and abuse are disproportionately experienced by young women (Duggan 2014; Marwick & Miller 2014), which takes a toll on their mental wellbeing, and potentially drives them away from internet participation (Hess 2014). The anonymity of the Gamergate harassers has been highlighted as an important factor in how the abuse spread:

The world of gaming is now heavily intertwined with the anonymous world of social media and the Internet. That has created a culture in both places that is rampant with bullying and threats – an upsetting but logical result of the culture of anonymity (Kidd & Turner 2016, p. 133).

[Gamergate] emphasized anonymity. [Gamergate] Twitter users expressed the danger of using their real names, as that would cause people to attack them (Mortensen 2016, p. 7).

But restricting or banning social media anonymity isn’t the solution to the harassment problem. Law scholar Danielle Citron (2014) doesn’t believe in curbing online anonymity, as demanding real names wouldn’t deter harassers but it would silence others. Frances Shaw (2013), through interviewing Australian feminist bloggers, has found a range of alternative strategies to combat harassment, including tight moderation of blog comments, and logging the Internet Protocol (IP) addresses of commenters so they can be blocked if they become abusive. Using IP addresses to create centralised identity systems is seen as a potential solution to the harassment that occurs on alternative, throwaway, or ‘sockpuppet’ accounts: platforms can allow multiple accounts with multiple usernames as long as they can then block all of them if one is engaging in misconduct (Lingel & Gillespie 2014; Ness 2010). Increasing online

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<sup>2</sup> Detailed accounts of Gamergate have been written by Golding & van Deventer 2016; Kidd & Turner 2016; Massanari 2015; and Mortensen 2016.

surveillance in order to curb harassment and crime is a popular solution, although it has the potential to harm vulnerable groups instead.

Anonymity is one response to the fact that social media platforms now exist within a culture of surveillance, which may have been precipitated by global events like the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 (Solove 2011) or the Edward Snowden revelations, which involved Snowden leaking classified information from the US National Security Agency to journalists in 2013 (de Zeeuw 2015). In a surveillance culture, actions performed on platforms, such as posting, liking, and friending, are automatically quantified as data and recorded, archived, and linked. These ‘digital traces’ are fragments of past interactions or activities (Reigeluth 2014), which can form a bigger picture when put together – of a person’s interests, spending habits, health and wellbeing, insurance risk, or even their identity.

Surveillance not only occurs as an automated process via social media platforms; people also watch other people. Anna Reading (2009) argues that Facebook normalises performative surveillance because the platform is designed to make personal information available to connected friends and, when someone posts to Facebook, the expectation is that their post will be seen by others. This process is called ‘social surveillance’ (Marwick 2012): using social media to check in with, and check up on, friends. Social surveillance exists alongside pushback to being surveilled by people and platforms: the Pew Research Center reports that people are increasingly concerned about how much information is available about them online, with 86 per cent of people who use the internet taking steps to avoid surveillance by other people and organisations, such as deleting posts or clearing browser histories (Rainie et al. 2013). Such steps, as well as other strategies like using other people’s accounts or the Onion Router (ToR), a system of transmitting encrypted messages over several routes, are called ‘obfuscation’ by Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum (2011). Obfuscation is a form of vernacular resistance against surveillance culture for situations in which refusing to contribute to profiling and data collection is not an option. To use Tor, or other forms of obfuscation like encryption or Virtual Private Networks, a certain level of technological proficiency is required, and decentralised gatherings called CryptoParties have been set up to teach non-specialist people how to stay anonymous in a world of digital traces (CryptoParty 2016).



Anonymous people experiment with their identity, speak out, and access all kinds of information and conversations – but anonymity can also become an element in harassment and abuse. Through presenting these key moments in online anonymity, I highlight persistent themes of freedom versus harm. But anonymity is not a straightforward issue: when people sign up to social media platforms by inputting an email address and username, they can hardly be called anonymous. Discourse, and academic scholarship, are lacking a nuanced understanding of the politics of names in social media by neglecting how people draw on pseudonyms to negotiate networks of people and platforms.

### **Pseudonymity: Getting beyond anonymity versus real names**

“Names are central to our identities”, claims Patrick McKenzie (2010, n.p.), a programmer who challenged website builders to do more than just code one box for a first name and one for a surname when designing a website. Building on this notion, Zip, the transgendered woman who instigated the custom gender feature on Facebook, calls names a tool for description, and argues that names change based on context. After having her own profile disabled for violating Facebook’s naming policy, she condemned the site for leaving her with the choice between using her real name, or using a name by which people would know her (Zip 2015). Choosing names is an important way in which people seek control over their identity online. The idea that someone can be pseudonymous by using a name that is not their own is intrinsically linked with the modern conception of identity as formalised by bureaucratic processes of distinguishing individuals from one another through official documents. But although being in the world in a way that deliberately divorces actions from identity markers can seem to pose a threat, Kelly Gates (2011), writing about surveillance culture, argues that always being identifiable would be detrimental to society. The most stable societies do not involve people being constantly identifiable, but people who have autonomy and control over their own identities and lives. Marx (1999) also makes this point when he argues that living in a state of either total anonymity or total identifiability would be equally impossible; he recognises that names and pseudonyms both have their place, an argument extended by Bernie Hogan (2013). In presenting Facebook as a site that is designed for people to manage their singular identity, Hogan argues that its real-name policy betrays a misconception: “that the negative space of one’s real-name online

presence is filled with demons and demagogues” (Hogan 2013 p. 292). He suggests people use pseudonyms for functional reasons, like claiming a unique username; situational reasons in order to mitigate the social awkwardness of context collapse; and personal reasons, like identity play within conversations that people wish to remain disconnected from their public selves, including topics about politics or sexuality. When people communicate under a name they choose, they are engaging in a process of making their message meaningful by constructing and reconstructing their identity in a series of negotiations between individuals, groups, organisations, and interfaces.

Stephanie Newell (2010, p. 19) argues that “the ‘pseudo’ in pseudonym implies the presence of a fiction or a fake”. Pseudonymous texts have long provoked suspicion and distrust by being linked with trolling, harassment, and abuse, leading to calls for real identities to be mandatory in online interactions (Cho 2013; Geist 2014). In networked communication, the use of pseudonyms is complicated by explicit demands from platforms’ end-user licence agreements that people must provide their real names, the persistence and reach of social media texts, and increasingly sophisticated data collection. Although Craig Scott (2004) describes pseudonyms as fictitious identities, pseudonyms can be meaningful ways to express an identity and contextualise communication on social media. Ellen Moll argues that debates over pseudonymity are really about the nature of identity and power both online and offline, and they “reveal a host of complex and multi-layered tensions about technology’s influence on the construction of personas” (Moll 2014, n.p.). Pseudonyms can be as simple as using a nickname, or as complicated as a 3D virtual avatar. They can be temporary, as in the case of using throwaway accounts on Reddit (Leavitt 2015), or can gain accountability and reputation as a persistent identity (Knuttila 2011). Despite their prevalence, there has been little scholarship directly concerning pseudonyms on social media. Hogan puts forward the idea that platforms requiring real names constitute the real-name web. He argues that using real names should not be the only way of engaging with social media, because “we are not free if we are bound to all of our past content” (Hogan 2013, p. 290). Ben Light (2016) argues that when pseudonyms operate within networked publics, they are not necessarily broken by being used offline – in fact, in the context of gay hookup software application Squirt, people use their pseudonyms to facilitate a meetup, then again within the app to leave a testimonial on their partner’s profile.

Through presenting these key moments in the discourse around online anonymity and pseudonymity, I wish to emphasise that identity is multifaceted, complex, and socially

constructed, and that the effects of names and pseudonyms on interactions are not easy to predict. Munmun De Choudhury and Sushovan De (2014) consider the pseudonymity of bulletin board Reddit to be a crucial aspect of the high levels of self-disclosure they witnessed in their research on seeking support for mental health issues, while Grace Chi En Kwan and Marko Skoric (2013) found more than half of their 1,597 survey participants from across two secondary schools in Singapore reported they had experienced bullying on real-name platform Facebook, as this harassment had bled from interactions at school into an online setting. I raise these two studies as counterpoints to arguments that equate anonymity with antisocial behaviour and real-name policies with civility.

Instead, a consideration of *pseudonymity* better nuances discussions around social media anonymity, by taking into account the way that naming practices can be dynamic and vary contextually, rather than assuming that anonymity is a static state that is typically assumed by people who intend to engage in antisocial communication. This introduction now moves to establish how this research project contributes to the discipline of media and communication with knowledge about social media affordances, practices, and disruptions. I then discuss the thesis methods and a consideration of ethics while carrying out the project, before outlining the thesis structure.

### **Thesis proposition and research questions**

The proposition of this thesis is that the problem often considered to be anonymity on social media needs to be rethought as pseudonymity, which is identity work that involves relationships between affordances, practices, and disruptions.

This thesis understands pseudonymity as identity work, the process of creating a self through actions and representations online (Beech 2008; Cover 2012; Light 2014), which involves negotiations between people and platforms in order to control and contextualise social media communication through using different names. It explores social media pseudonymity, aiming to answer three main research questions:

1. How do names on social media establish contexts and connections?

2. How do people engage in identity work, involving negotiations between platform affordances and other people in networks, when they want to be pseudonymous on social media? What happens when this identity work is disrupted?
3. What are the implications of being pseudonymous in a social media culture that privileges real names?

### **Context of the research**

In a thesis with identity as a core theme, I believe it is important to acknowledge my own identity, as a white, English-speaking, middle class woman in her twenties from suburban Melbourne, Australia. Although research strives to be impartial and objective, these factors have undoubtedly influenced the way I have approached social media as an area of study. As ethnographer Radhika Gajjala argues, “researchers’ subjectivities are produced within historical and structural constraints, making it impossible for them to adopt a ‘view from nowhere’ stance” (Gajjala 2002, p. 180). My view of social media focuses on platforms that have become commercially and culturally successful in middle class suburban Melbourne, including Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, all developed in the US. These are the platforms I am most familiar with, and the ones I feel I can most confidently and accurately discuss as a result. They are also the platforms that have attracted most research attention, which is a limitation: as Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth put it, “there are many internets across the world, accessed and used in a variety of ways” (Hinton & Hjorth 2013, p. 7). Platforms like Renren, Tencent QQ, and Sina Weibo in China, Cyworld, KakaoTalk, and KakaoStory in South Korea, and VKontakte in Russia command a great deal of web traffic, and, within platforms that originated in the US and are used in multiple countries and contexts, there exist boundless variations on use, as Daniel Miller (2011) has illustrated with his work on Facebook use in Trinidad that deliberately contests the idea that ‘proper’ Facebook is limited to the US. For Geert Lovink, the concentration of research on US-based platforms is a shortcoming of social media studies:

The globalisation of the internet has been mostly invisible for the dominant Anglo-American internet culture due to organised wilful ignorance (Lovink 2008, p. xi).

Recognising some of my own privileges as a researcher, and the dominance of research on platforms that originate from the US, is a way to be clear about the context of my work. Within this diverse global field, this research pays attention to a specific aspect of social media identities: pseudonymity. To appreciate why I have chosen to research pseudonymity on social media, I now discuss what it means to have a name, and explore some of the thinking on online and social media names.

### **Names: Signifying connections; asserting control**

As this thesis is about pseudonyms, meaning ‘false name’ (Room 2010, p.3), it is helpful to first understand what an orthonym, or ‘true name’, refers to. A name is a social identifier that locates a person within a family and cultural group. Naming someone, as when parents name their children, is an assertion of authority and control over them, because naming is an act of power (Guenther 2009). Names have long had resonance within family groups: according to sociologist Hayley Davies (2011), the use of surnames to indicate lineage emerged in Europe and North America during the seventeenth century, and patronymic naming, in which a child takes their father’s surname, entangles the social and cultural meaning of a surname with interpretations of biological connectedness. This tradition persists, despite the growing visibility of queer culture, and criticism from feminist scholars, who consider a man’s surname becoming a woman’s after marriage, and a child’s after birth, a patriarchal construct (Lockwood, Burton, & Boersma 2011).

Conventions around naming vary enormously. Just one example is that of the Kelabit from Central Borneo in Malaysia, who change their names up to four times in a lifetime as they become married, parents, parents-in-law, and grandparents, in order to reflect their growing family (Böck 2013). Names can also be a site of cultural struggle. In British West Africa in the early twentieth century, the vexed relationship between the African educated elite and the colonial authority resulted in African people deliberately disrupting British naming conventions when they wrote for newspapers: they would use Africanised versions of Christian names; publish their name changes, since African names accrue titles over time as their public standing increases; or write pseudonymously (Newell 2010).

The names people choose for themselves are powerful. Married women choosing to keep their own surnames can be seen to be making a statement about their identity in the face of a patriarchal society that traces family lineage from fathers. As Deb Dempsey, Jo Lindsay, and Lara Hulbert Manika (2012) discovered, about 90 per cent of children in Victoria, Australia have their father's surname, indicating a strong convention of honouring paternal lineage, which creates particular associations between family names and culture. In trying to reconcile this tradition and giving her child a surname that reflected a whole family, Lorelei Vashti chose to create a portmanteau of her own and her husband's surnames, deciding on 'Waitsman' instead of either 'Waite' (her own surname) or 'Wortsman'. Instead of following the tradition in Australia that children inherit their father's surnames, Vashti suggests that "families are changing and thus surnames are changing too: it can now be a decision rather than a default" (Vashti 2015, n.p.). For Arica Coleman (2016 n.p.), "self-naming is one of the pillars of self-liberation". She quotes boxer Muhammed Ali on the importance of his name:

Cassius Clay is a slave name. I didn't choose it and I don't want it. I am Muhammad Ali, a free name – it means 'beloved of God', and I insist people use it when people speak to me (Ali in Coleman 2016 n.p.).

It is insulting or demeaning to call someone by a name they have rescinded. In the transgender community, 'deadnaming', or referring to a trans person with the name of their former gender identity, misgenders and devalues them (Amelia 2014; Dobrowolsky 2014). In an article about Facebook suspending drag performers for not using their real names, Niedt argues:

An act of renaming also functions generally as an assertion of the right to anonymity and re-invention, a method of control over which aspects of identity will define the individual ... Just as birth names can encode gendered – as well as ethnic, (sub)cultural, or other demographic – information, so too can self-assigned names when their bearer feels a need to realign those backgrounds (Niedt 2016, p. 105).

He says that when people rename themselves, they are seeking a name which more accurately reflects who they are or have become. Sometimes, names signify that a person is playing a particular role. In a study of German dominatrices using pseudonyms, Andrew Wilson (2005) found these to be crucial to conveying fetish elements: 'Lady Barbara' and 'Madame Cartier' emphasised sophisticated, powerful women, while 'Stern', 'Winter', 'Scarlet', and 'Dark' had associations with domination fantasies and sadomasochism.

The names people are given when they are born formally register them with government departments, forming a unique identifier for the person when connected with other details including their date and place of birth. On social media, names have the potential to be different from the names people have been given. Facebook's demand to see legal proof of a name when its own terms have been breached is one that Nadia Drake claims "forces compliance or isolation" (Drake 2015, n.p.). On social media, names and platforms both matter to communication expectations. The Emily van der Nagel on Facebook is not likely to have the same profile information as the Emily van der Nagel on LinkedIn – one is a social site for networks of friends, and the other is for details about the professional self.

As names are social, their use online depends on contexts that do not necessarily draw on biological connections or formal titles. In addition to identifying people and building trust, names also function as data points that provide a link to other kinds of personal information. Biometrics, such as DNA, fingerprints, and faces; or a host of government-issued numbers like those on birth certificates, passports, and driver's licences, or social security numbers in the US, all uniquely identify someone, but names are what makes this information meaningful. A name is a common, but not always reliable, way of fixing identity (Goffman 1963). When used to identify someone to a social media platform, names become a central point from which to make connections and generate either communication, content, or data, depending on which of the competing visions of social media is in focus.

### **Social media: Connecting people; creating data**

Studying how identities, names, and pseudonyms operate within social media brings me to an overview of the way social media is defined and discussed within academic

literature. Definitions of social media tend to refer either to a channel through which to present identities and foster relationships, or to a business model that profits from immaterial labour and data collection. No neutral definitions of social media exist, and my own is certainly influenced by my background as a media and communications scholar: *social media consists of websites and applications designed for personal accounts to submit and interact with media texts in networks*. There is more to be said about how developments in internet culture and the shift to Web 2.0 prefigured social media, and I will return to this in Chapter 3, Web 2.0 and the real-name web. For now, I wish to emphasise that names and pseudonyms are central to social media profiles, connections, and communication. This section unpacks some of the ways social media is discussed, and how social media functions for data collection and identity expression.

One widely cited definition of social media comes from Nicole Ellison and danah boyd,<sup>3</sup> who highlighted the construction of a profile, a list of connections, and the viewing and traversing of these lists in their 2007 definition of a social network site. David Beer (2008) calls their definition too broad, as he sees Web 2.0 as a general shift in which social networking sites are only one category of many. Rather than attempting to define social media at all, Light (2014) deliberately avoids doing so, as he does not think it possible to pin down a perpetually changing, always incomplete phenomenon. Ellison and boyd (2013) updated their definition six years later, fitting with the discourse around Web 2.0 by offering a ‘definition 2.0’ of a social network site that stresses interacting with participant-generated content, rather than creating a profile. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein (2010) claim social media is important for businesses, touting applications that connect people through profiles of personal information as a low-cost way of reaching consumers.

Considering people who use social media to be consumers is part of the way in which social media platforms incorporate capitalist logics, according to Alice Marwick (2012) and Theresa Senft (2013). Both scholars argue that people present themselves on these platforms according to the same self-promotion tactics employed by celebrity culture, with an awareness that they are building a profile for specific audiences. An important aspect of the commercialisation of social media is what van Dijck and Thomas Poell

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<sup>3</sup> danah boyd does not capitalise her name for many reasons, including that the lower-case ‘d’ of ‘danah’ balances with the lower-case ‘h’, that capitalising first person pronouns feels self-righteous to her, and that she wishes to exercise her own choice: “it’s *my* name and i should be able to frame it as i see fit”, she explains in a blog post (boyd n.d., n.p.).



(2013) call *datafication*: how a platform's gathering mechanisms render social actions as data, including friending, following, liking, and entering a name or pseudonym into a designated box. To access any platform, people must generate data, argues Mark Coté (2014). Any time people input their personal information into social media profile templates, they are generating demographic data that identifies the market segments they belong to, which platforms sell to advertisers so they can target the most relevant audience for their products. Social media platforms exist not to help people foster meaningful connections, but to deliver people's attention to advertisers and so influence purchasing decisions (Baym 2011, p. 399). According to van Dijck and David Neiborg (2009, pp. 865-866), "Facebook does not want to link friends to friends, it is in the business of linking people to advertisers and products".

Facebook not only keeps all the data that people input into the platform, it also uses its Like button and similar tools to track people across the web – visiting any website via a Facebook Like or Share button sends that information back to the platform (Angwin 2014). Google is also becoming more aggressive about building complete portraits of people. Although it has been able to combine login data with cookies and IP addresses to connect search queries to particular individuals for some time (Mayer-Schönberger 2009), in June 2016 a privacy policy update erased a longstanding promise that web browsing records would be kept separate from personally identifying information, leaving the company able to create detailed, named profiles of online activity (Angwin 2016). Platforms' collecting and selling of personal information has prompted scholars like Tiziana Terranova (2000) and Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Sevignani (2013) to claim that all social media use represents immaterial labour, which exploits people because there is a power imbalance between those who create the data and those who profit from it. This exploitation is downplayed at every opportunity by platform designers, who take care to emphasise the benefits of their service: connecting with others, keeping up to date, and having fun. When the blank box to compose a new Facebook status update prompts: "What's on your mind?", it deliberately foregrounds personal experience and identity.

For Marwick (2005), the rigid profile structure of most platforms encourages people to present themselves in ways that portray them as consumers, not citizens. Representing their identity in fixed, codified ways means people are encouraged to define themselves through the entertainment products they consume. van Dijck reminds us that "social media are not neutral stages of self-performance – they are the very tools for shaping

identities” (van Dijck 2013a, p. 213). While people represent themselves through curation of content, as well as written, visual, and quantitative means (Rettberg 2014), the never-finished project of a social media identity also involves negotiation and resistance, as a response to platforms like Facebook privileging single identities with people using their real names. Creating and navigating social media identities involve various strategies, including using false information as a playful way to demonstrate belonging to a peer group (Livingstone 2008), or untagging photos, images, or memes to avoid the identificatory link they suggest (Cover 2012).

Pseudonymity is a key strategy within identity management on platforms that aim to connect as many details as possible with the central data point that is someone’s name. It’s especially relevant in the face of context collapse, the difficulty of maintaining a coherent identity when people from different areas of life are all part of the same platform. Michael Wesch calls this a problem when deciding what to film and post on YouTube, as there are “an infinite number of contexts collapsing upon one another into that single moment” (Wesch 2009, p. 23). Marwick and boyd (2011) note that on social media, people are communicating with groups they don’t normally bring together, including acquaintances, friends, colleagues, and family. Collapsed contexts can result in what Zizi Papacharissi (2014) calls performative incoherence, which occurs when people aren’t able to effectively craft an identity that makes sense to a range of audiences without compromising their sense of self. Papacharissi notes two strategies to cope with context collapse: self-censorship, and the crafting of polysemic messages that are encoded with meanings for audience members to decode differently.

In the face of context collapse, pseudonymity is a tactic that not only compartmentalises audiences, but also allows people to choose how they present themselves to those audiences. For example, Google+ allows people to post to specific ‘circles’ of chosen connections – but each circle receives these posts from someone with the same name and profile information. Creating a second, pseudonymous Google+ account is the only way to present an entirely different profile. According to the Pew Research Center, multi-platform use is on the rise, with slightly over half of online American adults using two or more platforms (Duggan et al. 2015). I suggest that a major reason for this is to contextualise communication, often by highlighting different aspects of the self across multiple audiences: for example, someone might use their first and last names on Facebook, a pseudonym on Reddit, and the default username ‘Anonymous’ on 4chan. Discussing pseudonymity as a strategy to combat context collapse leads me to

considering other researchers' attempts to recognise that pseudonymity is a dynamic set of practices that involves more than just anonymity as a stark opposite to real names.

### **In between real names and no names: Different types of pseudonymity**

Although anonymity is used to describe all kinds of communication from people who are not using their legal names, anonymity online is, if not completely impossible, a rare occurrence. Cole Stryker (2012) argues that true anonymity is only possible when someone purchases a new laptop with cash, accesses the internet only through public wi-fi, and signs up for new accounts using a protected browser. This troubles the idea that anonymity can be achieved by using a pseudonym, or not using a name at all, online. In fact, all situations and actions reveal something about a person, including where they are, what they are interested in, and how they present themselves.

Platforms, languages, and cultural references all add context to communication, which is further complicated by having personal information quantified and stored. Even if no name is provided by someone on social media, every device accessing the internet has an IP address, which can be recorded.

I agree with Lovink's (2011) claim that variations of anonymity include collaboratively written Wikipedia articles, peer-to-peer file sharing, and random video chat service Chatroulette, rather than with Stryker's (2012) idea that the only way to be anonymous is to be untraceable by any kind of system. The distinction concerns who someone is anonymous to: other people, or computerised systems. People who are worried about what might come up in a Google search of their name have different concerns to those who focus on their data being sold by companies or used as a form of surveillance by governments. Kimberly Christopherson (2007) terms this distinction 'technical' and 'social' anonymity: technical anonymity removes identifying information in the exchange of content, while social anonymity involves other people not being able to identify someone. When people are anonymous online, they wish to control what information of theirs is collected, stored, distributed, and analysed by companies, governments, and other people. Platforms provide tools that ostensibly help to navigate these concerns: Facebook lets people toggle who can see status updates, while Google+ offers the ability to post to different groups. But while these features selectively let other people see

particular content, the platforms themselves are always collecting every piece of data they can.

Most of the time, the term ‘anonymous’ doesn’t mean that every aspect of an identity is obscured: identity isn’t a binary between fully anonymous and fully identified. Many scholars have described this complexity in terms of a continuum (Qian & Scott 2007). Judith Donath (1999, p. 51) argues that “full anonymity is one extreme of a continuum that runs from the totally anonymous to the thoroughly named”, while Jessica Beyer struggles when categorising sites into ‘anonymous’ and ‘not anonymous’: “instead, I ended up with a continuum” (Beyer 2012, n.p.). This idea is also described as a scale between anonymity and identification (Larsson, Svensson, & de Kaminski 2012, p. 96), or a matter of degrees (Misoch 2015). The complexity of naming practices includes pseudonyms (such as Lewis Carroll), collective pseudonyms (Anonymous), mononyms (Stilgherrian), pen names (Mark Twain), stage names (Buck Angel), anglicised names (Michael instead of the Slavic Mykhailo), women’s changing of their surnames after marriage, nicknames, and usernames or handles that either play on a given name (grassisleena) or avoid mentioning a given name at all (labcoatman).

Organising anonymity into types is a way to express that there are a range of actors involved: the individual making decisions about their identity information; other people in their network; platforms; search engines; computing devices; organisations; and governments. I present this work on different types of anonymity and pseudonymity in order to recognise that other scholars have made inroads into recognising that these are complex terms. But this thesis moves beyond categorising anonymity and pseudonymity, towards an exploration of how people use usernames, pseudonyms, and other identity information to navigate social media platforms to access information and conversations that are important to them. This scholarship on what it means to have an online name has informed my thinking around social media pseudonyms, and has guided the design of the research project’s methods.

## **Methods**

The chapters in Part 2 of this thesis present case studies as a way of studying social media pseudonymity within specific contexts, but each case study draws on slightly different methods of data collection and analysis. I will discuss each case study’s methods in more depth in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, but for now I wish to provide an

overview of why I have chosen case studies for this thesis, and how I have gone about ethically collecting data and conducting content analysis in a way that fits my research questions.

According to Michael Crotty (1998), research methods are an expression of how a researcher understands what human knowledge is, and how it is discovered. Crotty argues that it is of vital importance to explain not only the procedures carried out in the course of a research project, but also the understandings and assumptions that lie behind these methods. I take on a qualitative approach, which Marwick (2013b) argues can help unpack assumptions about technologies and reveal much about the social norms of communication. Qualitative research places technology use into specific social contexts, places, and times (Marwick 2013b).

This thesis looks at three cases, each covering a different context in which naming and pseudonymity are central issues. Malcolm Tight (2010) claims that ‘case study’ is not a meaningful term, because almost anything can be a case, and suggests that researchers call these small-sample, in-depth studies instead. I still use the term ‘case study’ to describe my research strategy, because Tight’s purpose in dismissing the term is to focus methods discussions on how the data used has been created, collected, and analysed, which is what this methods section does. I turn to Robert Yin’s handbook on case study research to explain my decision-making process during the conduct of my research. Yin describes a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin 2003, p. 13), as opposed to a research method involving experiments that divorce a phenomenon from its context to control the variables.

I find Yin’s description of case studies pertinent to conducting social media research, because the platform on which content circulates is not only its context; the platform also shapes the communication. For example, on Twitter posts can be a maximum of 140 characters long, while on Reddit people can only submit text posts or links to multimedia like images or videos. Yin claims that the case study strategy is best suited to research questions aimed at discovering an explanation for something, rather than quantifying a phenomenon – so asking how people use social media pseudonymously is a question more suited to a case study approach, rather than asking how many people are anonymous on a particular platform, for example. When using case studies as a research

strategy in this thesis, I have paid attention to social media platforms, practices, and posts. Case studies are flexible about what counts as a case, or a unit of analysis within a case, as these decisions are to be made based on what best answers the research questions guiding the study. This thesis presents three case studies that seek to investigate particular aspects of social media pseudonymity, involving multiple sources of evidence, including direct observations of platforms, a platform walkthrough, surveys, news items, and social media posts.

### *Data collection*

This thesis has drawn from a variety of sources to best capture the texts that were most relevant to each case study. Investigating social media affordances led to a case study of the 2011 nymwars, a contest over Google+'s real-name policy. I have used observations of the protest site *My Name Is Me*, structured small-scale interviews to follow up with participants in *My Name Is Me*, platform policies on Google+, statements from Google+ employees, a platform walkthrough of Google+, and news articles and blog posts about the nymwars. These perspectives have given me an insight into the backlash to Google's real-name policy, and the importance of affordances for pseudonymity.

I have then turned to exhibitionist subreddit Gonewild to study the way people practised pseudonymity by negotiating people and platforms, and revealing select facets of the self. Perspectives from the people posting to Gonewild, as well as a study of the usernames, images, image titles, and comments present on the site, are important to this case study. I have drawn on a year-long observation of the subreddit and conducted a survey of Gonewild posters, asking them for their views on, and experience of, pseudonymity.

Having studied pseudonymity affordances and practices, in the final case study I investigate what happens when pseudonymity is compromised through doxing: making forced connections between someone's online communication and other facets of their life, including their name, location, occupation, and relationships. This chapter employs a comparative case study of two separate doxings: an American Redditor, and an Australian political blogger. Firsthand accounts from the people who were doxed are included along with media coverage of the doxings.

When I draw on news items as evidence, I am acknowledging their role in shaping public discourse. Joshua Braun and Tarleton Gillespie argue that “journalists aspire to speak not just *to* the public, but in some idealized way, *for* the public” (Braun & Gillespie 2011, p. 384; emphasis mine). Sharing and discussing news items fuels much talk about current affairs on social media: Teun van Dijk argues in *News as Discourse* (1988) that news is a type of text or discourse, as it is made public, emphasising that the processes of producing, publishing, and understanding news have an important social dimension. Media sociologist Nick Couldry (2008) claims that the media continually refers back to itself as the assumed reference point for accessing social reality: if news items have the power to shape social reality through discourse, then the ways they communicate news events deserve scrutiny. News content merits systematic study because it is the product of routines, practices, and values, constructed by news workers, that reflect the culture of journalism and knowledge, as well as the society it operates within (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico 2014).

#### *Method: Content analysis*

Once data had been collected in the form of texts including news articles, blog posts, survey responses, and social media posts like images, image titles, and comments, the next step was to formally engage in the process of analysis – although Robert Stake (1995) argues that there is no specific moment at which data analysis begins, because researchers give meaning to first impressions as well as final sets of data. This thesis employs content analysis as its method to highlight relevant aspects of the texts that have helped me answer my research questions.

Klaus Krippendorff (2013), John Williamson et al. (2007), and Kimberly Neuendorf (2002) all provide similar steps when outlining how to conduct a content analysis. After a research question has been formed and texts located, content analysis defines and identifies units of analysis within the texts, develops categories for these units, and analyses the data in a way that will answer the research question. Vivienne Waller, Karen Farquharson, and Dempsey (2016) argue that content analysis assumes there is a relationship between textual representations and the social reality beyond the text. Similarly, Jim Macnamara (2005) claims qualitative content analysis pays attention to not simply the text, but also the audience, media, and contextual factors associated with it. This is why I begin each case study by describing the case within its social and

cultural context, before drawing out the specifics of how the case is an instance of pseudonyms operating, and being contested, within social media.

As Thomas Lindlof and Bryan Taylor (2011) argue, it is often unclear how researchers have performed their content analysis, as they sometimes simply suggest their themes ‘emerged’ from repeated readings. A further complication is that making assertions depends on drawing from understandings “whose derivation may be some hidden mix of personal experience, scholarship, assertions of other researchers” (Stake 1995, p. 12). Content analysis should carefully explain how the decisions involved in selecting, counting, and categorising the texts were made, and how the results help to answer the research question; as Williamson et al. argue, “as long as the rules of the game have been spelled out, we can evaluate how conclusions were reached” (Williamson et al. 2007, p. 285).

Every PhD candidate faces the challenge of designing a research project that balances what is feasible to accomplish with what will yield meaningful results. A case study approach has meant I can be specific about which platforms I have researched, but locking down one area of analysis has also meant shutting off other potential areas of interest. Case studies offer a detailed examination of a phenomenon or event, but it is difficult to make claims about broader internet culture based on just one platform. This landscape is changing quickly. Since 2012, when I began this research, more people are spending more time with social media – according to the Pew Research Center, use of social networking sites grew from 55 per cent of American adults in 2012 to 65 per cent in 2015 (Perrin 2015). But recording social media’s growth in numbers doesn’t take into account shifting practices and norms around use; for example, what kinds of information are public and private. This is just one ethical challenge that social media researchers must face.

### *Ethics*

In accessing social media texts, collecting them as data, and analysing them, researchers need to be aware of how best to do this without causing harm to the authors. In short: What social media data can researchers ethically use? Nancy Baym (2011) argues that ethics in social media research is crying out for sustained critical analysis. I



focus on ethics here to maintain transparency while contributing to an emerging body of scholarship on the rapidly developing social media environment, to draw attention to ideas that are still forming with regards to how public or private media texts are, and to explain some of the decisions I have made while carrying out this research project.

The distinction between public and private texts is a major tension in research ethics, and it needs careful consideration (Markham & Buchanan 2012; Waskull & Douglass 1996; Zimmer 2010). Expectations of online privacy are always contested and changing, claim Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan (2012) in the recommendations on ethical decision-making by the Association of Internet Researchers. They advise attending to the specific needs of each case, and list some questions a researcher should ask themselves in the course of a research project, including how the context is defined, how the data is being accessed, who is involved in the study, how the data is being managed, how findings are presented, and potential risks associated with the study. The authors note that collecting information from publicly accessible social media sites has ethical parameters that can shift with people's expectations: while some may feel their contribution to a platform is an important public document and they deserve credit as authors, others may seek anonymity.

Some are still questioning their own position on privacy, such as blogger Anil Dash (2014), who is uncomfortable with the idea that everything on social media can freely be published elsewhere without seeking consent. Just because data is accessible does not mean it is ethical to use (boyd & Crawford 2012), and there are no clear boundaries. Even an approach such as that of Malin Sveningsson Elm, in which she defines a public internet environment as one that is visible without requiring any form of registration, and declares this "clearly public enough to study without informed consent" (Sveningsson Elm 2009, p. 75), is qualified by her also suggesting that posting on a website that does not 'feel' public means researchers should not take that information out of context.

In this thesis, I have collected texts from social media sites that include comments from individuals. Considering how this plays out on one platform in particular gives an example of the broader ethical considerations of the thesis. When drawing on material from Reddit in the second case study, I have considered how Reddit presents itself, and how Redditors perceive the site and its level of privacy. Reddit's own privacy policy states that "the posts and comments you make on reddit are *not private*, even if made to

a subreddit not readily accessible to the public” (Reddit 2015a n.p.; emphasis mine). In addition, Reddit posts are often collected and republished by other websites, such as the post ‘The 30 happiest facts of all time’ (Stopera 2013) on content aggregator BuzzFeed, which displays the highest-voted posts in a listicle asking, ‘Reddit, what is the happiest fact you know?’ (RiPotato 2013). This slippage between platforms occurs frequently and publicly, meaning that Redditors are likely to be aware of the potential for their content to be reproduced elsewhere.

Despite Reddit appearing as a public site, Buchanan (2011) warns that online reputations must be considered, and that it may be necessary to omit sensitive information from published results. As a way of taking contextual integrity (Nissenbaum 2004) into account, I have struck a balance between giving credit to the original source, and protecting those who are discussing potentially delicate topics. I have referenced the usernames of Redditors who are posting to a wide audience by starting a thread, or the moderators and programmers writing public documents such as guidelines or frequently asked questions. In turn, I have anonymised Redditors who are replying to a single question or topic thread, attributing the quote to the generic author name ‘Redditor’. In this way, I have made efforts to ensure that Redditors posting content cannot be identified in their original context, and are treated with respect.

## **Thesis outline**

There are two main parts to this thesis. Following this introduction chapter, Part 1 investigates how the concept of pseudonymity has been historically constructed, and traces the history of usernames and profiles alongside the social development of the internet. Part 2 takes on case studies to consider the intentions and implications of pseudonyms: control over communication and context management. I now further explain the two parts.

Pseudonyms are a persistent feature of social media, but they also have a history almost as long as print. Chapter 1, Pseudonymity history: Authorship, the author-function, and what authors mean for digital texts, traces the terms ‘anonymity’ and ‘pseudonymity’ back to the Enlightenment and the arrival of the printing press. It examines Michel Foucault’s author-function to establish that the term ‘anonymity’ is deeply connected with the concept of the author, meaning that anonymity and pseudonymity are both

expected properties of texts, which establishes that online communication is entwined with the written word. The chapter argues that pseudonymous texts are considered threatening because they have separated the author from the writing and, as such, lack context and accountability.

Understanding the history of the internet is essential in order to be critical of current and future internet culture, argues Lovink (2008). Chapter 2, Identity work from usernames to profiles: The development of social media pseudonymity, considers the internet's development as a communication tool through the lens of pseudonym use, arguing that the textual internet of the 1990s has largely, but not fully, given way to a more profile-based internet that includes much more personal information such as work history, location, and photos. Drawing on Erving Goffman's ([1956] 1990; [1961] 1972; 1967) work on self-presentations and interactions, I argue that pseudonymity is a form of identity work that may be undesirable from the perspective of a platform which seeks to harvest and sell personal data, but valuable for people who wish to compartmentalise their communication.

Many platforms now ask people to use their full, legal names, which I investigate more thoroughly in Chapter 3, Web 2.0 and the real-name web. This chapter moves from the history of internet communication to specific consideration of the impact of Web 2.0 discourse, and the increasing uptake of social media, on identity and pseudonymity. By exploring the real-name web, in which platforms mandate real names (Hogan 2013), I discover plenty of resistance to the idea that people have a unitary, fixed identity.

Because of this preference for real names, using pseudonyms on social media involves negotiating platform affordances, pseudonymity practices, and networked disruptions, so this thesis presents three case studies in order to investigate this process. The first case study, Chapter 4, Pseudonymity affordances: People and platforms clash over identity politics in the 2011 nymwars, takes an affordance approach to study the way Google+ was designed to be used only by people who are able and willing to use their real name on the platform. This chapter charts the 2011 backlash to Google+'s real-name policy and affordances for real names, which became known as the pseudonym wars, or nymwars. This protest re-emerged in 2014 when Facebook began suspending the profiles of drag queen performers, accusing them of not using their real names as the platform stipulates. I draw on news articles, blogs, and Facebook posts from public accounts; a platform walkthrough of Google+; a discussion of protest website *My Name*

*Is Me*; and a survey of people who gave statements to *My Name Is Me*, five years after the site was active, to illustrate the insistence from the public that people need to have agency over their identity.

The next case study, Chapter 5, Pseudonymity practices: Faceless bodies on Reddit Gonewild, builds on the affordance approach by examining practices, or what people *do* in relation to social media, to investigate how people negotiate and contest affordances. A practice approach has allowed me to foreground the negotiations between a person and a platform that are so crucial to identity work. This chapter examines pseudonymity practices through a sustained critical examination of the amateur exhibitionist site Reddit Gonewild, which features people posting photos of their naked bodies under pseudonyms. Studying such pseudonymity practices has meant paying attention to the complex negotiations involved when people use Gonewild to reveal their naked bodies while selectively presenting other aspects of their identity. Through an analysis of the subreddit and a survey of people who post to Gonewild, I argue that pseudonymity is crucial for self-expression and identity formation, as it allows people to contextualise their communication, rather than linking it with their searchable real name and identity.

Pseudonymity may involve a series of conscious and careful practices, but it can also be disrupted, as in the case of doxing, or ‘dropping documents’, which involves making someone’s private information public as a retaliation technique. Chapter 6, Pseudonymity disrupted: Making forced connections through doxing, compares two cases of pseudonymous content producers being doxed by having their name revealed in a news article, which meant their social media communication leaked out beyond that platform and context. Doxing disrupts pseudonymity by forcing connections between someone’s pseudonym and other information about them that they did not wish to associate with their pseudonym, like photos of their face, details about where they live and work, or relationships they wished to keep from the public. Through an analysis of news articles and blog posts responding to the doxings, examined through anthropological theory on masks and unmasking, I argue that these news narratives reinforce particular understandings about ways of officially being in the world through legal names.

Understanding how pseudonymity plays out in different social media contexts, and what kinds of discourse it enables, means being able to engage more meaningfully in internet

communication. If social media is a mechanism by which individuals construct and negotiate identities through technological, social, cultural, institutional, economic, and political means, as I argue, then how pseudonyms contribute to, and how pseudonymous people disrupt, these social media platforms deserve to be interrogated. The conclusion of this thesis, *Towards an understanding of social media pseudonymity*, draws together the historical and contemporary forms of pseudonymity with the case studies of pseudonymity as a dynamic set of affordances, practices, and disruptions in order to present the main findings of the thesis, thereby contributing to ongoing conversations around the research ethics of social media. I also offer some suggestions for future research into platform design for multifaceted identities, online harassment and abuse, and digital access and literacy for social media.

This introduction has provided some first thoughts on online names to ground the thesis. Beginning with moments in which anonymity was important to digitally networked communication, I have then explained how this thesis will go beyond these broad understandings of real names versus anonymity by considering pseudonymity affordances and practices, and how these can be disrupted, through case studies that illustrate how vital pseudonyms are in giving people control over their identity, communication, and connections on social media. There have long been calls for studies of internet use, particularly social media studies, to properly historicise this research. Baym calls for scholars to recognise that human communication and technology have a history, as internet research is “too often plagued by the notion that everything is new” (Baym 2009, p. 720).

Considering all the forms the internet takes as one monolithic entity is naturalising or essentialising the internet as a technology: specificity matters, and the media are sites for socially, historically, and culturally specific experiences of meaning. For this reason, the following chapter addresses the history of pseudonymity and authorship, in order to argue that these are constructed ideas that have particular relevance to the media text as a form of communication.

# PART 1

## Historical and contemporary forms of pseudonymity

# CHAPTER 1

## Pseudonymity history: Authorship, the author-function, and what authors mean for digital texts

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### Introduction

In studying social media pseudonymity, I first historicise the concept of pseudonymity, before asking about what it means in a social media context. Print historian Elizabeth Eisenstein (2011) argues that examining printing's past gives a historical perspective to current scholarship on new media, which helps to understand the issues alive today. The introduction of this thesis has briefly canvassed some of the common viewpoints on social media anonymity and pseudonymity: for example, Facebook CEO Zuckerberg (in Lovink 2011) considers anonymity to be risky, because it potentially contributes to bullying, harassment, and negativity on social media. This chapter investigates where this idea has come from, arguing that anonymity and pseudonymity have always been intimately bound with ideas of authorship. Pat Rogers sees authorship as a way of legitimising a text:

Authorship and authority have become inextricably linked, and literature without a responsible agent identified is like an artefact that turns up in the saleroom lacking a decent provenance. Both anonymity and pseudonymity have become suspect behavior (Rogers 2002, p. 233).

Rogers' point, that texts without authors are suspicious, reveals the same kind of attitude that has led to Zuckerberg insisting on a real-name policy for Facebook. I argue that understanding the history of print and authorship is fundamental to understanding ideas about social media pseudonymity.

‘Anonymity’, meaning ‘nameless’, and ‘pseudonymity’, meaning ‘falsely named’, originated as terms used to describe a piece of writing (Ferry 2002; Mullan 2007). In this chapter, I trace the origins of the pseudonym back to the development of the printing press, which led to a publishing industry in which the author took over from the printer as the owner of a text, and I argue that pseudonymity is directly related to authors: it means the name of an author is being deliberately withheld. Robert Griffin specifically links the term ‘anonymity’ with published books, calling it “the absence of reference to the legal name of the writer on the title page” (Griffin 1999, p. 882). This is too one-sided for Joan DeJean (1984), who argues that the definition of an anonymous publication should take into consideration the reader’s reception of a text: just because there is no name on the book does not mean the author is not widely known. Anonymity and pseudonymity mark an absence of information about an author; these terms do not describe strangers on the street, but are specifically related to the textual. This chapter considers the longevity of pseudonymous authorship, something that came into being despite the role of the author’s name in signifying authority, authenticity, and accountability.

I ask how ideas around anonymity and pseudonymity relate to social media pseudonymity, drawing from Eisenstein’s (2009) argument that the printing press revolutionised human communication. The concept of the author was critiqued by Roland Barthes ([1967] 1977) and Foucault ([1969] 1977), who understood the production and dissemination of texts as important to their interpretation, since readers derive multiple meanings from the same text. Foucault’s idea of the ‘author-function’ ([1969] 1977) emphasises the cultural conditions surrounding the production, distribution, and reception of a text, which comprise a complex process that results in some texts having authors, to the exclusion of other kinds of texts. Foucault reminds us of how important the process of distributing texts is to creating the position of the author. The internet continues those traditions, but it has also given rise to different ways of circulating media texts. After establishing that the authorship of printed texts gave particular meanings to what an author was, and what it meant to erase an author’s name, I consider digital texts in order to argue that some aspects of texts have changed, but ideas about authorship and pseudonymity are deeply entrenched.

This chapter places social media pseudonyms into a historical context of pseudonymous authorship to discover the enduring tensions around withholding names from texts.



## **The printing press: Where the author began**

When writing had to be manually produced, and few people could read, writing was a way to communicate with a very small number of people, as the production of a single book represented a great deal of labour (Febvre & Martin 1990). In the early days of hand-produced books, the majority were made as official documents by scribes who were representatives of the Catholic Church or the monarch. Unofficial documents that would be met with disapproval were almost always anonymous, and were simply destroyed, as copies were not easily made (Parry 2011). The invention of the printing press and its introduction to Europe by Johannes Gutenberg in 1439 changed the production and distribution of texts from being handwritten to enabling a large number of copies: Eisenstein (2009) describes the shift from script to print as a communications revolution.

The social penetration of literacy was uneven, and the meaning of written texts took a long time to solidify. Eisenstein (1980) claims the effects of the printing press were exerted unevenly, but continuously and cumulatively, from the late fifteenth century onwards, never diminishing. Couldry (2012) argues that printing was a shift in cultural production from texts made by scribes to products made for multiple readers. He is referring to the increasing commercialisation of printed products, especially books. Once presses were set up by profit-driving printers, a major transformation of Western European communications occurred (Eisenstein 1980). New notions of individual, rather than collective, authorship emerged. This mass distribution meant the Church and governments sought control of the flow of printed material (Parry 2011), as it was no longer possible to simply destroy the one copy of a written work. Printing, argues Eisenstein (2002), affects the flow of information, the collection of data, the retrieval of records, and the replication of images and symbols. Importantly for this thesis, printing also affects how the author of a text is thought of, and what their name means for a text's production, circulation, and interpretation.

Marshall McLuhan's book *The Gutenberg galaxy* insists that the effects of the printing press reach not only into every other form of media, but also into human behaviour, culture, and consciousness. He argues that "the interiorization of the technology of the phonetic alphabet translates man from the magical world of the ear to the neutral visual

world” (McLuhan [1962]1968, p. 18). He goes on to describe the invention of typography as a natural resource which has been absorbed by, and has therefore dramatically changed, culture. Eisenstein argues that the shift from manuscripts to printing “revolutionized all forms of learning” (Eisenstein 2009, p. 3), although this particular shift has been largely neglected by scholars. She stresses the importance of continuing to interrogate printed materials: although they are largely taken for granted, and are now paid far less attention than more recent, less familiar media, they continue to make a profound impact on daily life. Eisenstein elaborates on the conditions that were enabled by the printing press: the shift from script to print occurred during the commercial revolution; literacy grew; many more texts became available at a lower cost; and opportunities arose to compare the growing numbers of texts.

Eisenstein’s most fervent critic, Adrian Johns, claims she is too focused on simply acknowledging the printing revolution and that, in doing so, she ignores the potential to acknowledge it in a different way, such as asking how printing’s historic role came to be shaped. He argues that print is conditioned by history, rather than history by print (Johns 2002, p. 124), since a printed book is the result of a convergence of social and technological processes involving a large number of people, machines, and materials (Johns 1998).

The tension between Eisenstein and Johns is about how technology and society affect each other: they cannot agree whether society or technology drove the enormous change of the time. Asa Briggs and Peter Burke (2009) also disagree with Eisenstein: they argue that considering print as an agent of change downplays the contributions of writers, printers, and readers, and is too technologically deterministic. Similar arguments appear today about the impact of social media on society. In this thesis, I acknowledge that technology and society influence one another. I pay particular attention to authorship in this chapter, because I argue that linking authorship with authority has important implications for our understanding of social media pseudonymity.

### **Authorship and pseudonymity**

In the early sixteenth century, the printer had more control over a text than its author (North 1994), as authors would sell their manuscripts to printers and relinquish all ownership of them (Febvre & Martin 1990), therefore having no further moral claim or

financial investment in the work (Clare 2012). The printer was responsible for producing and selling copies of the text they had bought. The concept of the author developed slowly and unevenly, when some literary communities, such as universities and the London book trade (North 1994, p. 392), began to develop an interest in who had written a text, not just who had printed it. By the mid-sixteenth century, the title page, which declared the author's name and the publishing details of a text, was standardised, as the author was slowly becoming more important to the reception of written works.

It took decades after authorship developed before the term 'anonymity' appeared, in the early seventeenth century (Oxford English Dictionary 2013a), at a time when the printing press was gaining traction and authors were becoming increasingly relevant. This interest in names came at a time when they were beginning to reflect the growing influence of the state in governing populations. The state, as opposed to the Church, is an institution whose purpose was to formalise political narratives of nations, sovereignty, and citizenship, and an integral part of this process was issuing official identity documents that took over from local parishes keeping registers of births, marriages, and deaths (Caplan 2001). The aim of a system of standardised documents to manage individual identities, such as passports and licences, was to assign individuals an official identity that could be verified by the state and institutions. These documents, a relatively recent product of bureaucratisation, stabilised names, addresses, signatures, and photographs as identity markers (Gates 2011). The state officially recognising names meant both control and protection for citizens, as the state's interest in the stability of names extended to circumstances including voting, taxation, military conscription, security, welfare, and, most importantly for the purposes of this chapter, authorship.

According to Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin (1990), the profession of the author exists because of the printing press. After an author's name became a common way of identifying particular texts, excluding an author's name began to conspicuously mark an absence, because it flouted this norm. A pseudonym is presented as something false, a poor alternative to a true or real name: texts without the author's true name attached often "promise something bawdy, subversive, or politically dangerous" (Starnier & Traister 2011, p. 2). Considering a pseudonym to be a false name is something I argue against in this thesis, because it underscores the idea that people have true selves, and that names exist within a real and false binary. Rather, as will be discussed especially through the work of Goffman in Chapter 2, this thesis understands identity as being

performed, contextual, and multifaceted. Understanding the etymology of the word ‘pseudonym’ is key to a critical understanding of the ways anonymity and pseudonymity are discussed in relation to authorship and social media. Although the Oxford English Dictionary (2013b) claims the term ‘pseudonymity’ first appeared in the eighteenth century, Janet Starner and Barbara Traister (2011) trace it back to the late seventeenth century, after written work became increasingly commodified.

As texts began to be mass-produced at ever larger scales, literacy began to increase, and news publications emerged, governments sought control over the burgeoning number of texts. A Star Chamber Decree in 1637 England aimed to combat libellous, seditious, and mutinous texts that were printed without a licence and disturbed the peace (Clegg 2008). The author’s name was required to be printed on any book or pamphlet – perhaps an early real-name policy? This decree was important to the concept of the author, and as I discuss in the next section, the author-function, because although it sought to regulate printing through licensing texts and including the author’s name on them, it was directed at printers and booksellers as the people responsible for texts. Members of the London Company of Stationers regulated the print industry, and regarded their role as protecting the product crafted by printers (Clegg 2008). Of course, the decree did not stop the flow of unlicensed and imported texts, but this practice risked punishment. Before the Star Chamber decree, the punishment for an unregistered printer involved having their press broken and texts destroyed, but the decree replaced this with being whipped and pilloried through the city of London. For Cyndia Clegg (2008), this move represented a shift in the perception of printing as something that belonged to the public domain, facilitated by printers and booksellers. As England moved toward civil war in 1640, the public’s interest in news and politics grew, increasing demand for printed material and contributing to the abolishment of the Star Chamber Decree in 1641. This liberation of printers and authors saw a flood of anonymous publication in the following years (Mullan 2007).

By the early nineteenth century, growing literacy was spurring publishing on to becoming a thriving industry (Bhaskar 2013). Because publishing was becoming so profitable, who profited became a subject of interrogation: authors received both credit and criticism for their work. As Foucault puts it, “books were assigned real authors ... only when the author became subject to punishment” (Foucault [1969] 1977, p. 124). Although this is not the place for a detailed look at the emergence of copyright and

intellectual property law,<sup>4</sup> what is important to pseudonyms is that when copyright law developed, the author was recognised as the origin of value, and was given formal legal protection as the owner of intellectual property. While one of the dominant functions of anonymity is to protect authors (Griffin 1999, p. 891), one of the main reasons for copyright law is the right to attribute an author's name to their work. The legal recognition of copyright gave rights to the author, which meant they could assert moral and economic ownership over their work (Atkinson & Fitzgerald 2014). But printers and publishers also benefited from copyright law: when the author began to be recognised as the creator of intellectual property, the booksellers were the ones who benefited most from print monopolies, as they could gain exclusive rights to print pamphlets or books (Atkinson & Fitzgerald 2014). The first copyright statute, the Statute of Anne in 1710, provided authors with protection, and booksellers with security: copyright was a pragmatic bargain between authors, booksellers, and the public (Deazley 2006).

For at least the first three centuries of printing, it was especially risky to print content that would leave someone open to persecution for being libellous, seditious, immoral, or against religion or the ruling class (Terrall 2013). As one example, a publisher was hanged, drawn, and quartered in 1663 in London for publishing an anonymous pamphlet which justified the people's right to rebellion: with the author concealed, the state made the publisher bear the consequences for its content (Mullan 2007). Such measures demonstrated an insistence on accountability, implying anonymity was the source of slanderous texts, and putting publishers at risk if they printed texts anonymously. Within this desire to punish whoever was responsible for the text, Foucault's author-function can be seen at work. To understand the cultural relevance of a text and its author, considering the conditions of production, distribution, and consumption are crucial.

### **The author-function**

The author of a text is part of its overall context, which influences the way it is interpreted. Investigating the origins of the author through the development of the publishing industry means understanding that, most of the time, responsibility for texts

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<sup>4</sup> For more detailed accounts of copyright and intellectual property law, see Hemmungs Wirtén 2004; Deazley 2006; Alexander 2010; Johns 2010; and Atkinson & Fitzgerald 2014.

rests with their authors. But in the late 1960s, the relationship between author, text, and reader was being re-interrogated. French literary critic Barthes wrote the essay 'The death of the author', in which he argues that writing separates the author from their words, leaving the true meaning of a text to the reader who interprets it:

Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost ... this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins (Barthes [1967] 1977, p. 142).

Reflecting on Barthes' work, Terry Eagleton (1996) takes a reception theory perspective to describe language as slippery, because any interpretation of a text depends on the reader's cultural frames of reference. Eagleton suggests Barthes is dissolving all meaning into a free play of words: "the reader simply luxuriates in the tantalizing glide of signs, in the provocative glimpse of meanings which surface only to submerge again" (Eagleton 1996, p. 72). In announcing the death of the author, Barthes is foregrounding the importance of the reader (Hartley 2013). If writing is simply language circulating, this brings me to the argument of 'What is an author?', the essay by Foucault ([1969] 1977): that an author is the product of their writing, not its origin. Foucault considered the author a way to limit "the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations" (Foucault [1969] 1977, p. 138): he found polysemous texts, ones that had multiple meanings, threatening. Perhaps another reason why people fear anonymity doing harm is that without an author to anchor the meaning of the text, this 'proliferation of significations' can seem boundless and unruly. For John Hartley, the author is "a device for *limiting* rather than *expanding* meaning, reducing what any text or discourse means to the intentions of its designated originator" (Hartley 2013 p. 29). At a time when everyone with access to social media platforms can now publish their own writing, Hartley argues that authorship has expanded to the point of meaningless. But the author-function always reveals more about who has the power to authorise, and who a text's audiences are, than who the author is as a person (Chan 2014).

When Foucault puzzles over whether every single thing an author writes down, including appointment reminders and shopping lists, is to be considered a text that is

authored, he is really taking the focus off what a person does to create a text, backgrounding this process in order to give more weight to publication, distribution, and reception, during which the position of the author is created. The name of the author doesn't just refer to an individual; it signifies a role created as a product of power relations that exist within a particular society (Hendricks 2002). As Hartley (2013) puts it, an author is not a simple individual, but someone who channels institutional authority into text. The figure of the author emerged from print technology, the book industry, the author having legal status in copyright law, and an ideology of the individual as creator (Poster 2001).

These elements intertwine to give authorship a specific kind of cultural recognition. For Janet Clare (2012), it isn't important that William Shakespeare may have been a collective of authors rather than a single person, because authorship is a complex role that involves a range of institutions: efforts from authors, publishers, printers, and licensors all contribute to the understanding of who should be recognised as the author of a text. As Anita Chan (2014) argues, the author-function is indelibly linked to the circulation of certain discourses in society, as it reveals more about which people or institutions hold the power to 'authorise' a text than about who the author actually is. Authorship has always been historically and socially contingent.

I am interested in the author-function in this thesis on social media pseudonymity because it advances the understanding that texts are valued and given meaning in different ways depending on the form they take (for example, a blog, comment, image, meme), the platform on which they appear (Twitter, Reddit, a news website, a Wikipedia article about memes), and, most crucially, *who authored them* (someone pseudonymous, a journalist, an academic). According to the legal scholar Laura Heymann (2005), an author's name when it appears on a published text is a trademark or brand she calls an 'authornym'. She draws on Foucault to assert that the author-function is the way an author's name organises the text for consumption. An author's name links them to their work, but authors sometimes use different names to contextualise their work for audiences, giving information about the form, content, and worth of a text. *Harry Potter* author JK Rowling has written adult novels with the pseudonym Robert Galbraith, prolific horror writer Stephen King wrote under Richard Bachman to avoid saturating the market for his novels, and KA Applegate stopped writing books in the *Animorphs* series herself, editing ghostwritten entries to the series instead. Someone can't be a 'bestselling author' until the author-function has been performed by having someone's

manuscript published by a publishing house, given a price tag, made available for sale, reviewed, and bought by a certain number of people. These are processes that take place after an author is finished writing. The way authorship is understood affects the way texts are read and understood (Garvey 2006), which is also important when there is no name on a text at all: according to Mary Terrall (2013), leaving the author's name off a text allows for multiple readings.

In thinking through Foucault's question, "what is an author?" in the context of expanding internet communication, Elvin Wyly (2015) considers how the different kinds of production involved in digital texts have changed the relationship between authors, texts, and readers. He argues those relationships are being realigned, especially now that authors and texts can be measured in real time by downloads, page views, citations, and other digital representations of engagement. Picking up his enquiry, I now interrogate the way the author-function operates for pseudonymous digital texts.

### **Pseudonymity and digital texts**

I begin here with a claim that deliberately overstates the impact of the internet on authorship, in order to reinforce the need for a historical approach that nuances new developments:

The new citizen of this new community is free to invent new texts, to annul the traditional notion of authorship, to delete the traditional divisions between author and reader (Nunberg 1996, pp. 304–305).

Instead of the internet 'deleting' the distinctions between author and reader, I argue that the idea of authorship that first developed around the printing press has simply been reinscribed on the internet. Of course, notable exceptions exist – Amit Ray and Erhardt Graeff (2009) point out Wikipedia as an example of distinctions between author and reader becoming blurred, because anyone can edit the text. But few Wikipedia readers are also contributors – the bulk of the work is done by a dedicated group of volunteers (Blodget 2009) – and, while it is possible to create an account and add information to, or amend, Wikipedia, to do so is to take on the role of 'editor'. Even this



example of traditional boundaries dissolving includes people taking on familiar roles. Rob Cover also sees the roles of author and reader being in flux, but he proposes that there are new tensions, rather than divisions being deleted:

The interactive and digital nature of computer-mediated communication results in several new tensions in the author-text-audience relationship, predominantly through blurring the line between author and audience, and eroding older technological, policy and conventional models for the 'control' of the text (Cover 2006, p. 140).

Johns (2002, p. 106) claims that "the advent of electronic communications is inevitably casting the era of print into a new light", reflecting on the continuities, rather than the differences, between print and digital culture. It is clear to me that the internet, rather than representing a completely new era of literacy, builds on the culture of literacy through mediated communication that began with the printing press, and developed through the intervening decades. When Jason Whittaker (2002) explores the history of the internet, he understands the internet as a global telecommunications system with the telegraph and telephone as important precursors. The internet has restructured communications in important ways, but not definitively new ways – the telegraph was an instantaneous global communication device; people used the telephone for business and chatting; the radio enabled listeners to call in and become part of the conversation. Writing before the internet became a domestic technology, Eisenstein argues:

The process that began in the mid-fifteenth century has not ceased to gather momentum in the age of the computer print-out and the television guide. This last point needs emphasis in view of the distracting effect of new electronic media. The somewhat chaotic appearance of twentieth-century culture ... owes at least as much to 500 years of printing as to radio, phonograph, moving pictures, or TV (Eisenstein 1980, p. 106).

Digital texts move through different publication systems from creator to audience. Where once a text had to be handwritten as a manuscript, sold to a publisher, printed,

and stocked in a bookshop, a digital text may be typed on a computer, saved as a digital file, emailed to a publisher, and edited before it is printed and put onto bookshop and library shelves. Or it may follow a very different path: a digital text may involve just two lines of text put over a template of a widely recognised image and uploaded to Reddit, which makes it available for others to read, vote on, save to their own computer, or redistribute to other platforms.

There will always be claims that the internet has changed communication into something completely new: for Seán Burke, the emergence of digital technology has reconfigured the text, author, and reader, as “the fixed everywhere gives way to the fluid, centres and margins are dissolved, meaning is seen as illimitable, textuality becomes an open sea” (Burke 2008, p. 186). But even a cursory glance at the way word-processing software is designed reveals that digital texts only reinscribe traditions born in paper and ink. Creating a document in a file on a desktop, ‘bookmarking’ articles to read later, and animations of turning pages to signal progression through a book are all skeuomorphic designs: they represent aesthetics and functionalities of physical objects. Michael and Ronda Hauben (1997) argue that the internet continues the technological development of the printing press, in terms of updating information, connecting people around the world, opening up communication channels, making publishing accessible, increasing intellectual activity, and progressing science and democracy.

The author-function is important to pseudonymity because it emphasises that it is not just a name that matters, but how the name is created within a particular context and received by a particular audience. Texts must be interpreted within cultural spaces (Johns 1998), meaning that examining the ways texts are produced, distributed, and consumed is crucial to understanding their meaning. Patrick Davison (2012) considers Foucault’s author-function in relation to internet memes, which he describes as pieces of culture that gain influence through online transmission. Davison claims that the author-function is similar to modern metadata, like tags and keywords, which classify and group together separate works. I argue that metadata can perform an author-function, but not in the way Davison suggests: tags and keywords sort texts based on their content, like a conceptual expansion of a filing system for documents. But when a computer creates a document, or a smartphone takes a photo, these texts are encoded with details about the device that made them – a kind of authorship that represents both a device’s affordances and a human’s decision to use them. Metadata, like an

author's name, only becomes salient when readers use this information to make a text meaningful. But do social media posts have authors?

### **Authorship on social media**

The reason I am interested in how the internet has changed the relationship between authors, audiences, and texts, and whether social media posts have authors, is because this matters to understanding social media pseudonymity. Foucault has a definite perspective on which kinds of texts have authors:

In our culture, the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others: a private letter may have a signatory, but it does not have an author ... an anonymous poster attached to a wall may have a writer, but he cannot be an author. In this sense, the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society (Foucault [1969] 1977, p. 124).

Likewise, Siân Bayne (2006) makes a firm distinction between texts that are authored, and texts that are not. Novels, textbooks, monographs, and poems are authored; graffiti, advertisements, emails, and websites are not. Writing and sending emails, she claims, does not mean someone can call themselves an author: a distinction that entrepreneur Ross McMinn makes light of when he jokes in his Twitter biography that he is the “proud author of several emails” (McMinn n.d.). This joke highlights that the processes involved in creating and disseminating texts that are conventionally understood to be authored do not usually apply to emails. Authorship of social media texts may also be downplayed as a result of corporate social media platforms referring to people as ‘users’ of the site, which implicitly positions people as consumers who create content, rather than authors who create texts. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (2013) question authorship on Facebook and Twitter, arguing that people, platforms, policies, and algorithms all have a hand in producing what people see on their feed, and even tweets often defy simple notions of authorship when people retweet or embed links and memes. Attributions of authorship are how practices of mediated communication are given

specific values and meanings (Gray & Johnson 2013). For Lisa Nakamura (2002), people of diverse racial backgrounds are excluded from authorship online, not only as content producers, but as authors of platforms. Considering a platform as a text to be authored provides an analytical lens within which to question who makes decisions pertaining to platform design and control.

Because content and actions can be translated into data and sold, social media is designed for active participation, prompting people through generic queries like “what’s happening?” on Twitter or “what’s on your mind?” on Facebook, and displaying like, comment, and share buttons at the end of each Facebook post. But ‘use’ on social media can involve actively posting, reactively liking, or passively listening, as Kate Crawford (2009) describes an emerging mode of social media engagement. Calling people who participate in social media ‘users’ ignores the nuances of what people actually do when they are ‘using’ the platform. It also blurs together several kinds of actors, including developers, advertisers, researchers, and non-humans like algorithms, who also ‘use’ platforms along with the end-users for whom the platforms are originally designed (Bucher & Helmond 2017). Considering social media texts under the broad umbrella of ‘use’ is a way to understand the platform as a tool for creation, which instigates a process that downplays the author. This is another way the author-function comes into play: a process is at work here that designates some texts as belonging to an author, while others seem to belong to a platform.

The author-function is not universal or constant. James Meese (2014) argues that in amateur content production, like cute pictures of animals, there is a notion that they simply belong to the internet. But Meese demonstrates that reposting content on Reddit is considered to breach Reddit’s voting system, because people on Reddit will often protest if someone reposts a picture, or take it to an unofficial tribunal, Karma Court, to decide if a reposter should be punished. Authoring an email, tweet, blog, or status update becomes especially relevant when they are copied. Freelance writer Olga Lexell filed a request to Twitter to have tweets that copied a joke of hers removed, claiming that she makes her living writing jokes, and the tweet was her intellectual property (D’Orazio 2015). Twitter now deletes tweets that authors report as copyright infringement, replacing them with the message: “This Tweet from @Username has been withheld in response to a report from the copyright holder” (Twitter 2016).

Since copyright law was enacted with the vision in mind of a solitary genius creating original works (Heymann 2005), tweets being removed because they are infringing on someone's right to own their work is an example of social media texts being understood in the same way as texts from print culture. It demonstrates that the author-function is a cultural process, not just simply deployed at the moment when someone puts their name or pseudonym to a text. Social media texts can change in status, and this can affect perceptions of their author. For example, the Twitter account @shitmydadsays compiled quotes from a young man's father. After the account became popular, a selection of tweets was published as the bestselling book *Shit my dad says* (Halpern 2010). This established Halpern as a book author, rather than attributing the tweets to the pseudonym that functioned as his username. The ways social media posts circulate can amplify their impact on audiences.

The author-function operates in uneven ways across digital texts. To juxtapose two different ideas about writing, Foucault argues that writing is a "voluntary obliteration of the self" (Foucault [1969] 1977, p. 117), while boyd claims that consciously creating a digital presence or social media profile is a process of "writing oneself into being" (boyd 2010, p. 128). These seemingly opposing viewpoints about what happens when someone writes are both true: in creating a social media profile, someone writes an introduction about themselves, creating a particular impression for their imagined audience. But once they have posted it, they are not often immediately present to elaborate on, or defend, that piece of writing. Words do not drift about aimlessly; they have origins, they reach certain audiences, they can be repeated or attributed or stolen.

## Conclusion

It is crucial to look back at how concepts like authorship and pseudonymity developed to make sense of the way they operate today: conversations about authorship, attribution, and anonymity in media texts are not new. Texts are written from a particular facet of the self, and finding meaning in a text requires more than just knowing who the author is; it is about understanding the cultural systems of production from which the text comes. The author-function is a process that involves authorising discourse, as well as drawing attention to how texts and discourses produce authors as subjects. Distribution

matters, just as the platform, the network, and the context matter for pseudonymous social media texts.

Foucault's work emphasises the importance of studying the conditions from which texts emerge. This thesis situates social media texts in a context of commercial platforms that have a history of distrusting anonymous and pseudonymous writing, then leveraging that suspicion to impose real-name policies on people who use them. Understanding pseudonymity as an act of resistance means knowing where these ideas come from.

Foucault's author-function helps me to make a case for why it is important to study the environment in which social media texts are produced, which includes aspects of the technology that produced them, as well as their cultural context. The author-function is the way that Foucault talks about the relationship between author, text, and reader. For this thesis, it is important to consider these relationships in the context of social media pseudonymity, because I am investigating the relationships between social media posts, posters, and platforms. This research wants to find out how platforms encourage or discourage certain kinds of authorship of texts, how responsibility of a text is contested if it lacks an author, how social media texts are pseudonymously authored, and how people approach pseudonymous authors and texts.

One way in which the author-function plays out on social media is through people having usernames and profiles: putting a name or a pseudonym to a text, along with its reception through various contexts of dissemination, leads to some social media texts being ascribed particular legitimacies. The next chapter takes on identity work, usernames, and profiles to investigate how pseudonymity has developed online. It considers the development of internet communication, from bulletin boards to social network sites, in terms of the names people use.

## CHAPTER 2

# Identity work from usernames to profiles: the development of social media pseudonymity

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### Introduction

The names that authors choose signal important information about them, what they say, and who they intend to say it to. The previous chapter linked the history of the term ‘pseudonym’, false name, to social media pseudonymity. I drew on Foucault’s concept of the author-function to argue that it is the pseudonym, as well as the processes by which a text circulates, that matters. On social media, ideas of authorship are still influential in relation to the way people identify themselves and communicate. This chapter draws on work from Goffman, a sociologist and symbolic interactionist who writes about the presentation of the self ([1956] 1990), and ‘face-work’ (1967), or the maintenance of a cohesive social identity. In doing so, he explored precursors to social media that involve people creating usernames and profiles: particular kinds of self-presentations that require an understanding of platforms, communication, and audiences to be effective. When someone registers with a platform by entering the username by which they identify themselves to others, they have begun an ongoing process of performing the self. Usernames began as a way of identifying an individual using a computer system, and have since taken on social conventions that vary based on context and platform: different facets of an identity are on display when someone makes an email account, changes their chatroom name, enters their first and last names on Facebook, or accepts a system-generated email account for work. These kinds of negotiations between a person, a platform, and other people in their network are a specific set of practices known as identity work, derived from Goffman’s analysis of self-presentation and interaction.

The case studies of this thesis discuss specific situations and platforms in which the kind of identity work that involves pseudonymity have come to the forefront. To understand these social media contexts, this chapter considers pseudonymity as an

affordance and practice that spans many platforms. After drawing on Goffman's theories of self-presentation and face-work, I present various iterations of usernames and profiles to map their development from systems that relied on unique numerical codes, to text-based, username-centred communication channels, to the image-rich, multimedia-enabled, profile-based social media platforms that followed. By outlining the ways pseudonymity has operated across communication platforms of different forms, sizes, origins, ages, and audiences, I am really highlighting its congruities. Pseudonymity is always an ongoing process that involves consciously engaging with networked platforms to strategically present aspects of the self.

## Identity work

In considering how identity and pseudonymity have historically played out on web applications and platforms like bulletin boards, email, chatrooms, and social network sites, I turn to the work of symbolic interactionist Goffman. Symbolic interactionism highlights the meanings ascribed to interactions that form the minutiae of everyday life, and how these meanings are developed and shared (Teague, Leith & Green 2013). Working from the perspective that reality is made meaningful by the social, Goffman's ideas on identity as a performance remain influential in studies of self-presentation on social media. There is no core inner self, he argues in *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity* (1963): rather, identity comes from the way people become distinct from one another through unique combinations of circumstances and experiences:

Personal identity ... has to do with the assumption that the individual can be differentiated from all others and that around this means of differentiation a single continuous record of social facts can be attached, entangled, like candy floss, becoming then the sticky substance to which still other biographical facts can be attached (Goffman 1963, p. 57).

For Goffman, an individual is an entity about which a record can be built up: an "object for biography" (Goffman 1963, p. 62). Although he notes that records can be held in the minds of friends or in the personnel files of an organisation, another location for records



of social facts about a person is a social media profile: the details someone inputs into the template about themselves, the photographs they are tagged in, and the conversations they engage in. Goffman regards everyday life as a structure holding the individual to one biography, even though segregation of roles and audiences means people are actually made up of a multiplicity of selves. In *Encounters*, Goffman describes the difficulty people have in holding together the different spheres of their life: “When seen up close, the individual, bringing together in various ways all the connections that he has in life, becomes a blur” (Goffman [1961] 1972, p. 127). This, too, has applications for pseudonymous use of social media: pseudonymity is a way of consciously separating some connections in a person’s life, so that they may interact with others in a way that more faithfully abides by the rules of interaction Goffman sets out in *The presentation of self in everyday life* ([1956] 1990). Here, he draws on a dramaturgical metaphor to argue that people present themselves in a manner akin to actors playing roles, putting on performances that depend on the audience and setting. He develops these ideas in *Interaction ritual* (1967), in which he studies face-work: the way people engage in interactions with the goal of maintaining face, or positive social value. Goffman argues that a person performing face-work is demonstrating their willingness to abide by the ground rules of social interaction. My purpose in attending to social media identities through Goffman’s work is to argue that the use of pseudonyms is a kind of identity work that reinstates the compartmentalised contexts, or ritual states, involved in communication. Pseudonymity is a way to abide by Goffmanian interaction rules in a social media setting that involves context collapse and spreadable content.

Although Goffman specifically discusses interactions that occur when two people are in each other’s physical presence, his framework is a way to understand more about social media identities, and how they influence interactions. For Rich Ling (2008), there are hints in Goffman’s work that ritual interactions can be mediated if there is the perception of co-presence, and Ling suggests that Goffman’s insistence on interactions as being strictly face to face is a legacy of his time. As relationships can be partly sustained by telephonic interaction, Ling believes Goffman’s framework of interactions can be applied to this form of communication. Likewise, Ruth Rettie (2009) argues that shared time, rather than physical co-presence, involves people experiencing an occurrence as a shared event. She claims that concepts developed by Goffman for face-to-face interactions can be adapted to analyse mediated interaction. Ling and Rettie are

both discussing the application of Goffman's frameworks to interactions mediated by mobile phones, but I argue that social media identities and interactions can also be analysed in terms of Goffmanian concepts like ritual states, identity performances, playing roles, front and back regions, and face-work. In her work on mobile phones, Rettie (2009) understands mediated interactions as being shaped by characteristics of the medium, as well as normative framing expectations, which is why this chapter is interested in the development of online communication platforms and the naming practices that occur within them. After all, offline situations are still mediated, or framed, in particular ways: Trevor Pinch (2010) argues that studies of online communication and Goffman's studies of people on a merry-go-round are both concerned with technologically mediated interactions. Different settings are crucial to interactions, argues Pinch. According to Heather Horst and Miller (2012), these frames work so effectively that it is difficult to see the framed nature of face-to-face interaction; studying social media provides a new awareness of frames taken for granted in person.

Examples of Goffman's work being applied to social media research can be seen in the following scholarship on front and back regions. Goffman ([1956] 1990) outlines a front region as any place in which a performance is given, while a back region doesn't have an audience and, as a result, a person can step out of character. But mediation of performances complicates this: according to Livingstone, a risk when presenting a biographical self on MySpace or Facebook is that it opens someone up to critical or abusive responses from others, because "the backstage self is on view" (Livingstone 2008, p. 403). For Dhiraj Murthy (2012), the way people share quotidian aspects of their lives on Twitter means they are letting people in to their back stage – but he includes the caveat that this means the audience is still getting a posed view. Hugh Miller and Jill Arnold (2009) consider online enactments of the self to be a front region, arguing that even time spent revising a message before sending it can be seen as a back region to this online self. Daniel Trottier's (2012) explanation is most similar to Goffman's: in his book on Facebook surveillance, he believes all communication occurs in the front region, because front regions are where social performances occur, and back regions are where those performances are managed. Livingstone, Murthy, Miller and Arnold, and Trottier have each extended Goffman's frameworks of performing the self from physical interactions to mediated ones. For this thesis, any post or interaction on social media is considered to occur on the front stage, while composing a tweet, selecting a profile image from a camera roll on a smartphone, or deciding on a Reddit username are all backstage

actions. But whether front or back stage, actions that involve creating, representing, or negotiating the self for audiences are part of the ongoing process of identity work.

Key to Goffman's work is the understanding that performing the self requires playing a variety of roles – or temporary ritual states – like work, leisure, or celebration. He argues that it is convenient to play different roles for different audiences, as well as separating the different audiences someone has for the same routine. Audiences that witness a show not meant for them will lose trust in a performer, so compartmentalising audiences is essential (Goffman [1956] 1990). Managing front and back regions is accomplished through face-work (Goffman 1967), which has been applied to social media through the concept of identity work, or “creating ourselves through our actions” (Light 2014, p. 105). In Mary Gray's (2009) work on queer youth identities online, considering identity to be work recognises the assembly and articulation of the self as labour carried out within networks of people and platforms. For Cover (2012), using social media requires an ongoing process of working to perform a coherent selfhood by modifying profiles and friend lists. But while Cover is concerned with the kind of identity work that produces visible evidence, work is also done when deciding what information, or which people, to exclude from a performance. Presenting the self involves emphasising some aspects of the self and concealing others (Bullingham & Vasconcelos 2013; Uski & Lampinen 2016).

One potential ramification of failing to compartmentalise communication is oversharing: transgressing boundaries of disclosure (Kennedy, Meese, & van der Nagel 2016). When social media sharing, either revealing information about the self or repurposing content from others, is framed as a way to articulate or deepen relationships, it has the potential to intensify the social (Kennedy 2016). But sharing, especially about the self, can be risky: Michael Zimmer and Anthony Hoffman (2011) claim that the act of labelling a disclosure as an ‘overshare’ positions it outside the norm, implicitly reinforcing boundaries around communication. Oversharing may result in disapproval from others in a network, by either not having the post acknowledged, or receiving a sarcastic rebuke (Kennedy, Meese, & van der Nagel 2016). But another outcome is that the disclosure is spread beyond its initial context, aided by Web 2.0 technologies that make information increasingly discoverable, thereby eroding individual control over information flows (Zimmer & Hoffman 2011). Many Web 2.0 platforms make posts public by default, or grant access to everyone on an approved list of friends or followers.

As this model ignores that there are different ritual states, or contexts, in someone's life, pseudonymity is a strategy to address the context collapse that platforms often bring about.

To understand the specificities of identity work within the Web 2.0 discourse, an exploration of its predecessors is necessary. This chapter examines various iterations of digital communication systems, services, and platforms,<sup>5</sup> each involving naming conventions and pseudonymity practices that reflect the context the medium provides, as well as offering a glimpse into the sociocultural identification strategies of the time. Broadening the concepts of self-performance and face-work to social media means recognising that all of the choices someone makes about their self-presentation influences their communication, even something as potentially trivial as choosing a username. I argue that pseudonymity practices contextualise communication by compartmentalising audiences, from having separate work and leisure email addresses to using multiple accounts to post to different subsections of the same bulletin board.

### **From user numbers to usernames: ARPANET and Unix**

The earliest usernames on digitally networked communication systems were numbers: unique identification codes that distinguished between different people using the same computer. This was necessary because computers were so rare. In the 1960s, an IBM computer took up a quarter of an acre of air-conditioned floor space, required 60 operators to input instructions and provide maintenance, and cost US\$9 million (Ryan 2010). Computers became increasingly smaller and cheaper, but they remained unaffordable for individuals for decades, meaning that only businesses, governments, and universities owned computers, and these had to be shared. User numbers let people access and work with the Unix operating system, which provided the basic tools needed to share information between computers, a key component in the development of the

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<sup>5</sup> While this thesis specifically concerns communication platforms, much productive work is also carried out on identities in online games. For scholarship concerning text-based identities in multi-user domains, see Dibbell 1994, Rheingold [1993] 2000, and Turkle 1995; for an account of avatars in virtual world Second Life, see Boellstorff 2008; for work on naming practices for multimedia avatars in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game World of Warcraft, see Hagström 2008.

internet<sup>6</sup> (Hauben & Hauben 1997). These user numbers meant people didn't have to individually own their own computer terminal – a screen that allows input from a keyboard – as these were also prohibitively expensive.

System administrators assigned the first unique identification numbers on Unix, which couldn't then be changed (Levine & Levine Young 2011). When a file was created in the Unix system, it was marked with the identification number of its owner. Although this was done for information security, it also continued the tradition of the authornym by appending an author's name to a file, thus encoding authorship at the data level. This kind of automated authorship still occurs every time a Word document is created, a text message is sent, or a photo is taken with a smartphone. Soon, people on Unix could log in with a username and password – and the username didn't have to be a real name. People logged in by typing "their name or other identification" (Ritchie & Thompson 1974, p. 373), a login system that became the convention as people began signing up for specific communication services such as email.

## **Email**

The first major identity communication system enabled a new kind of personal functionality for the internet. Although the precursor to the internet, ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), was designed for resource sharing, its success was largely due to the demand for electronic mail (Milne 2010): in 1973, email comprised three-quarters of all internet traffic (Whittaker 2002). Creating an email address meant choosing a name that would represent a person. Unlike giving out a home telephone number or street address by which a household could be contacted, an email address was most often chosen by one person, and reached them individually. An email address initially distinguished a mailbox and server, before engineer Ray Tomlinson chose the @ symbol to separate the mailbox and domain name. He wanted a character that would not be found in any person's name, to avoid confusion. @ also had the advantage of meaning 'at' the designated domain (Hafner & Lyon 1996). In 1984, this email address system pointed to seven top-level domains: university (edu), government (gov), company (com), military (mil), non-profit organisation (org), network

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<sup>6</sup> For scholarship on the origins and development of the internet, see Abbate 2000, Hafner & Lyon 1996, Hauben & Hauben 1997, Leiner et al. 1998, and Paloque-Berges 2017.

service provider (net), and international treaty entity (int) (Hafner & Lyon 1996), although top-level domain name options have since expanded to include domain names like .aero, .biz, .info, .museum, and .travel, and there are around 250 two-letter country codes which further identify a country or territory, like .jp for Japan and .eu for the European Union (ICANN 2009).

In 1999, Donath called a domain a “virtual neighbourhood” (Donath 1999, p. 33), and in 2012, Rolf Weber and Ulrike Heinrich are still using a geographical metaphor: they compare a domain name to a piece of land, describing it as a territory in cyberspace that enables communication. Within these top-level domain neighbourhoods, people can register their own name as their address, such as <http://emilyvandernagel.com.au>, and have their email sent there, as in [em@emilyvandernagel.com.au](mailto:em@emilyvandernagel.com.au). Domain name company I Want My Name explains that individual domain names are like pieces of property, which makes the company an online real estate agency (Hall 2015). Individual domain names are another way people can identify and express themselves, pseudonymously or not, while top-level domains can give clues about a person’s occupation, location, and status.

The username someone chooses as their email address is often laden with meaning, as people don’t always use their first and last name, but play with numbers, nicknames, interests, in-jokes, and cultural references – partly because email systems do not allow more than one person to have the same email address, but also as a form of self-expression. The username someone chooses becomes part of their personal front, according to Goffman’s work on the presentation of self ([1956] 1990). A personal front comprises features of a person that they are born with or cannot easily change, like their age, race, gender, and looks, as well as what Goffman calls the expressive equipment that follows a performer: features that do change, including clothing, posture, speech patterns, and expressions. An email address belongs to this second category, as a visible expression of the self that makes up an important part of someone’s personal front, which is crucial to any interaction.

Creative email addresses as a way of performing the self may also have been a way to distinguish an email address as one that existed outside the temporary ritual state (Goffman [1956] 1990) of work. In the 1990s and early 2000s, home and work computers often resided in different, fixed locations, and email domain names could signal the difference between work and leisure contexts. In the 2010s, people are likely to have

portable computers and smartphones that blur these boundaries (Gregg 2011), but separated work and leisure email addresses persist. Most schools, workplaces, and other institutions rely on automated systems to generate usernames and email addresses, leading to generic-looking accounts like evandernagel, van005, emilyv1, emily.vandernagel, and evan1988, all of which draw on data from human resource departments in order to provide students, employees, and clients with identification codes that look alike.

In the 2010s, email addresses are still a central point of communication, and are still the way people sign up to most internet services, including social media sites. The idea that *ceci tuera cela* ('this will kill that') is a common theme of discussion around technology (Nunberg 1996): that the computer will kill the book, or that social media will kill email. But phases of usernames and pseudonyms do not occur in a linear fashion, with one replacing another. Instead, they make up a rich communicative environment. Bulletin boards – online forums that allow people to sign in with a username and post messages to topic threads – are enduring sources of news and chat. While email allows for conversations between people who are mostly already known to each other, bulletin boards are a popular resource for those seeking discussions around particular topics. Bulletin boards tend to be unmoderated, while mailing lists are often overseen by a list owner. But, according to Esther Milne (2010), what unites them is the notion of audience: unlike private emails, mailing lists and bulletin boards involve messages exchanged in public.

### **Bulletin boards: The EIES, Usenet, the WELL, and 4chan**

Writing about the Electronic Information Exchange System (EIES) – a computer conferencing bulletin board system used in the 1970s – Starr Hiltz and Murray Turoff ([1978] 1993) note that people used their real names as well as pseudonyms in different areas of the board. People need multiple identities for the multiple roles they may play, they claim, which Goffman ([1956] 1990) acknowledges when he argues that problems sometimes arise when people must handle two different audiences at the same time. Hiltz and Turoff identify a number of reasons why people used pseudonyms on the board: to play a role in particular conferences, to have the freedom to say things they would not want attributed to them or their organisation, to signal that the discussion

was not to be taken too seriously, and to let newcomers experiment with sending messages on the board without fear of revealing their lack of skill in the medium.

Another reason for pseudonym use on early bulletin boards stemmed from the dominance of the American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII), an encoding standard that only contained English characters. People with names in languages other than English suffered from ‘ASCII imperialism’ (Pargman & Palme 2009), the built-in bias of this character set that made it difficult to sign up for, and communicate with, bulletin boards in languages other than English. Complicated forms of transliteration emerged, such as typing out Japanese words and phrases phonetically, then hitting a conversion key that displayed various options on screen (McLelland 2017). These language obstacles made names difficult to express. Because the distinctive vowel sounds in Scandinavian names (ø, æ, å) weren’t available in ASCII coding, Scandinavian researchers had to rewrite their own names in order for their work to become globally visible (Ess 2017). Before the Unicode standard that allows for all kinds of languages appeared in 1995 (Jo 2017), pseudonyms were a necessity for people whose names contain characters outside the ASCII framework.

But language constraints also allow for play. At National Taiwan University in 2000, a Nickname program was introduced to the university’s bulletin board system that allowed for the use of Chinese characters, unlike the Latin alphabet that had to constitute login names (Liang, Yi-Ren, & Huang 2017). Students used the changeable Nickname field to provide additional information about themselves, much like a Facebook status update. Nickname was shut down when some students began using it to look for sex partners by posting inviting messages: “users’ creativity always goes beyond the intention of the design” (Liang, Yi-Ren, & Huang 2017, p. 186).

Enthusiasm for pseudonymity is a theme in Howard Rheingold’s work on the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (WELL), an early bulletin board. Rheingold claims the WELL was a platform on which people connected with each other and developed their sense of self through experimenting with their identity. He argues that communication on the WELL “involves a syntax of identity play: new identities, false identities, multiple identities, exploratory identities, are available” (Rheingold [1993] 2000, p. 152). Rheingold’s work is emblematic of an optimistic era in 1990s internet scholarship when academics claimed that text-based communication platforms like bulletin boards had the potential to let people talk about their interests without being constrained by material attributes



like gender, age, ethnicity, and class. As in the seventeenth century, when the author's name was required to be included on any book or pamphlet (Mullan 2007), servers on Usenet would discard messages without the 'from' field filled out – but this didn't mean people included their real names in it (Lueg & Fisher 2003). For example, Paul Baker (2006) documents a trend in which people took advantage of the anonymity and lack of physicality on Usenet to create fake personae for themselves, and, according to Haya Bechar-Israeli:

In contrast to face-to-face encounters, computer networks nullify our physical existence. In a way, they free us from inhibitions created by our physical identity. We are more equal on the net because we can ignore it, and create a new self in cyberspace (Bechar-Israeli 1995, n.p.).

But these ideas are challenged by scholars like Joseph Kayany (1998), who argues that, rather than text-based, pseudonymous online interactions levelling out differences, participants bring their social norms and cultural affinities with them when they log on. Nakamura rejects the idea that the anonymity of the internet means it is inherently democratic, because Usenet discussions often represent the values and tastes of the dominant group: young, white, middle class men. Michael Mehta and Dwaine Plaza (1997) speculate that this cultural dominance created an environment that was less friendly for women, non-whites, and older people. It also meant that the lack of cues about personal attributes in a username would lead to the assumption that someone was part of this group. It seems predictions that the text-based bulletin board would facilitate an uninhibited communicative space were quickly negated by observations that socioeconomic factors can be communicated through pseudonyms and language.

Bulletin boards are set up to emphasise interests over identities. On 4chan, the result of everyone posting under the generic pseudonym 'Anonymous' is a common language of in-jokes, cultural references, and memes, rather than certain people on the boards becoming particularly well known. One creative way of telling stories on 4chan is the greentext: a genre of folklore in which details about the narrator are established as part of the story. Greentexts get their name from their formatting: on 4chan, text beginning with an angled bracket > appears in the colour green. These stories often begin by listing personal information about someone to set the scene: "be 3 years old", "be in the

third grade at a school assembly, feeling ill and feverish”; “be 15 in a bible camp”; “be a single father”. This convention reveals there are still assumptions that the dominant group is white, middle class, young, and male, as well as quickly establishing context in the absence of identifying information. It’s a way to include aspects of an identity without revealing a name. Greentexts originated in 2010, a time when many other ways of communicating identity and context were available, including photos, links, and memes, perhaps in part as a step away from the real-name web, which will be discussed further in Chapter 3. The stories often have unexpected endings, or a confessional tone, as they recount embarrassing moments from the narrator’s life:

Anonymous 03/24/13(Sun)19:45:21 No.6215899

- >be eating sandwich at the beach
- >skipping stones
- >watching the sunset and thinking about life
- >throw sandwich into ocean
- >bite rock

People saw  
(Nikkanen 2015).

According to Goffman, when an individual enters the presence of others, they are typically seeking information about the newcomer: “They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude towards them, his competence, his trustworthiness” (Goffman [1956] 1990, p. 1). Information about an individual helps define a situation. Again, Goffman is only interested in face-to-face interactions. But the context of 4chan already gives some information about a person: just by posting a greentext, they most likely belong to the dominant demographic group of the board. The narrative structure of the greentext provides details that orient a person to the story. This structure is often drawn on to evoke humour, as a popular genre of greentext stories involves introducing a character and setting up a scene, only to have the greentext end with a punchline that is a cultural reference, like a song lyric

or popular saying.<sup>7</sup> Even on 4chan, with an automated username that doesn't give any personal details, people still find it hard to resist the urge to narrativise parts of their identity that add to the story.

The contexts shifts again when joining a platform that focuses on personal connections and phatic chat, rather than topics of interest. While bulletin boards host one-to-many, asynchronous posts, chatrooms are typically ephemeral, synchronous, and more intimate.

### **Chatrooms: AOL and IRC**

Logging on to Internet Relay Chat (IRC) involves entering a full name and email address, but “these do not have to be your real full name and email address”, advises a Getting Started page (mIRC 2016). Instead, people are asked to select a nickname that matches their ‘virtual self’ (van Doorn, Wyatt, & van Zoonen 2008). Since 1988, IRC has allowed people to exchange text-based messages, either in dedicated groups or in one-on-one private chats. In the mid-1990s, America Online’s (AOL) chatroom was especially popular with people who sought out cybersex and pornography, thanks to its culture of pseudonymity, unmonitored chatrooms, and easy attachment of images (Green 2010). Writing in 1995, Bechar-Israeli describes IRC as an electronic environment in which people interact with others from around the world “at any hour of the day or night” (Bechar-Israeli 1995, n.p.). This phrasing is especially important, as it foregrounds the strangeness of the online by emphasising the novelty of having a communication channel that is always on. Don Slater (1998) notes that IRC is similar to older experiences of disembodied communication, like pen pal relationships or phone chats. In another perspective from the 1990s, before images were commonly available online, when digital cameras were rare, and dial-up connections made exchanging photographs slow and cumbersome, Slater says:

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<sup>7</sup> An example of a greentext with a twist ending begins, “be me, around 16, living in Australia, nice property, huge backyard, one day I see a snake”. The protagonist tells of feeding it tiny burgers made of small cuts of meat and bread, leading to the snake refusing to eat mice. The greentext ends with the punchline, “My anaconda don’t want none, unless you’ve got buns hun”, a line from the 1992 song *Baby got back* by Sir Mix-a-Lot (Vanerrr 2014).

IRC participants are intensely and incessantly aware of the fact that all on-line identities are textual performances: this is indeed the common sense of on-line life (Slater 1998, p. 98).

For Slater, the textual nature of IRC means that, as on Usenet, any identity can be performed but, as a result, no identity can be taken seriously, as there is always the potential for someone to misrepresent facts about themselves. But for Brenda Danet, Lucia Ruedenberg-Wright, and Yehudit Rosenbaum-Tamari (2006), the absence of visual cues to identity frees chat participants either to be someone other than themselves, or to be more of themselves than they normally express. They refer to IRC's ephemerality, speed, interactivity, and freedom from the material world to explain why chatters are often playful. Bechar-Israeli agrees, arguing that it is the pseudonymity of IRC that invites creative playfulness and experimentation with identity. His study saw just 18 people out of 260 using their real names when chatting on IRC, with the other 93 per cent of the group using pseudonyms. Choosing a nickname was often the result of a careful and creative process, since these nicknames are the first impression chatters gave to others online, and they come to represent the person chatting:

Just as we dress, put on make-up, or move in certain ways to display an attractive image of our bodily selves, participants choose screen names to create an 'appearance' that will attract other participants to chat with them (Del-Teso-Craviotto 2008, p. 257).

This dovetails with Goffman's ([1956] 1990) suggestion that clothing, makeup, and gestures are all elements of a personal front, and my own earlier argument that screen names and usernames are part of the personal front that makes up a social media identity. Although chatters are free to choose any nickname they want on IRC, and to change it as often as they like (providing it is not already being used by someone else), they are hardly free from social conventions around interaction. The first thing someone is likely to say to another chatter, after greeting them, is 'a/s/l?', meaning they were asking for the other person's age, sex, and location. As with greentext stories, a/s/l conventions satisfy a person's desire to gain personal details about someone when beginning an interaction. As Goffman argues:

Information about an individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them, and what they may expect of him (Goffman [1956] 1990, p. 1).

This convention made Niels van Doorn, Sally Wyatt, and Liesbet van Zoonen sceptical that people can transcend materiality through text-based chat, as a/s/l makes physical location a point of reference for the conversation that unfolds. While textual communication contains the aspiration to leave the body behind, it is still haunted by the “specter of embodiment” (van Doorn, Wyatt, & van Zoonen 2008, p. 372). Slater argues that people on IRC go to great lengths to make things material, and points out that, although chatters don’t always know who they are talking to, they do know they are talking to *someone*: There is “an absolute certainty of a material body out there” (Slater 2002, p. 232).

a/s/l is a process by which people present themselves as gendered beings through linguistic performances that are informed by social and cultural discourses, argues Marisol Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008). Some people include gender information in their IRC nicknames – a study by Danet (1998) reveals that about one-fifth of the 260 nicknames she surveyed contain a reference to gender. In the following encounter, however, this signal is enough to raise a potential sex partner’s suspicion that they are being too upfront about their identity to be genuine:

<AnGeLcAkE-14fFA> wanna cyber<sup>8</sup>?  
<shiroi> sure  
<AnGeLcAkE-14fFA> ok, i move close to u  
<AnGeLcAkE-14fFA> i start rubbin your chest and unbutton your pants  
<AnGeLcAkE-14fFA> ..  
<AnGeLcAkE-14fFA> hello?  
<shiroi> hmm? oh..er. Yea cool.  
<AnGeLcAkE-14fFA> u suck at this

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<sup>8</sup> To ‘cyber’ here refers to engaging in cybersex, a chatroom conversation for the purpose of mutual arousal.

<shiroi> I suck? You're the one signing on to irc with your asl in your nick looking for a lovelife. You suck at life.  
<shiroi> You're probably not even a girl.  
AnGeLcAkE-14fFA has quit IRC. (Quit)  
(QDB n.d.a).

This quote demonstrates Goffman's conclusion to *The presentation of self in everyday life*, in which he writes about what happens when an interaction sours. A person can never know every last detail about their interlocutor, which means they must rely on appearances instead. So, during an interaction:

The individual says in his mind, 'I am using these impressions of you as a way of checking up on you and your activity, and you ought not to lead me astray' ... as performers we are merchants of morality (Goffman [1956] 1990, p. 243).

This IRC encounter shows the veracity of the performance being challenged, and AnGeLcAkE-14fFA terminating the interaction in order to save face. Quitting IRC in this instance can be interpreted as an admission of guilt: they have failed to deceive their chat partner about their identity.

The limitations of IRC have led to humorous situations and identity play. Quote Database (QDB) is a resource for IRC quotes apparently submitted by chat participants – while it is certainly possible that the submitted quotes are made up for the purpose of internet humour, they are nonetheless productive in that they illustrate the boundaries and limitations of IRC as a communication medium. For example, the following quote documents a case of mistaken identity, with one chatter assuming their desired chat partner is present:

<Jeedo> hey baby, whats up?  
<Indidge> umm....nothing?  
<Jeedo> So....want me to like come over today so we can fuck?  
<Indidge> Wait....did you want to speak to my daughter?

<Jeedo> Yes Mrs.Miller.. :-/  
(QDB n.d.b).

People on IRC can change their usernames. In this quote, 'bm' changes their username to 'ab' in order to mimic 'ab' while they are away from their computer:

\* ab is away - gone, if anyone talks in the next 25 minutes as me it's bm being an asshole -  
<ab> HAAAAHA DISREGARD THAT, I SUCK COCKS  
(QDB n.d.c).

Changing usernames sometimes means adding extra information about a person. Here, a misunderstanding occurs when Porter decides to make it clear that he is in a relationship by appending 'with girlfriend who is hot' to his username. However, the IRC system does not allow spaces in usernames, making this difficult for a chat partner to decipher:

\* Porter is now known as PorterWITHGIRLFRIENDWHOISHOT  
<Strayed> he shot his girlfriend?  
(QDB n.d.d).

These quotes, which involve challenging someone's identity, initiating a conversation with the wrong person, impersonating another chatter, and adding confusing detail to a username, all led to unexpected situations. People on IRC navigate the features and social conventions of the platform while expressing aspects of themselves through their usernames. Communication on IRC is carried out with the expectation that one-to-one chats are mostly private, although some chatters still submit humorous moments to Quote Database, and group chats are mostly public (Humphrey 2009), which has implications for research on chat rooms. When Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008) conducted research on dating chat rooms in 2003, she gathered data including conversations and usernames without asking permission from the chatters: she considered the data to be

as public as television and radio broadcasts. By contrast to IRC, private chat programs like AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) or Microsoft Network Messenger (MSN) only allow a person to chat with people they add to a contact list by email address. This means the basic function of the program is similar to a chat room, but the context is different, giving rise to platform-specific practices and conventions of naming and pseudonymity.

### **Chat programs: MSN Messenger**

Usernames on MSN had three components: an email address, a display name, and a status update. In 1988, AIM featured ‘buddy lists’ that let people know when their friends were online (Larson 2002), and in 1999, MSN was launched to rival this popular service (Warren 2014). Having to mutually approve contacts before they were added to a chat list meant people usually used MSN to keep in touch with people they had already met, rather than strangers. People displayed a pre-set availability status to friends: ‘online’, ‘offline’, ‘out to lunch’, ‘on the phone’, ‘away’, ‘I am back soon’, or ‘busy’, which let people know which of their contacts were ready for a conversation.

Chatters use the name field to display not only their names, but also emoticons, and other information about themselves, particularly how they were feeling, relevant quotes, or song lyrics. In a study of 444 MSN chatters, Stephanie Smale and Saul Greenberg (2005) note half of them changed their display names at varying frequencies in order to broadcast information about themselves, including moods, life events, and pop culture references, such as “Amy – House hunting!”; “Joe was drunk on a Tuesday... shameful”; “Andrea – so long and thanks for all the fish”; “Bee – really am busy, only msg me in emergency”, and some didn’t include their name at all, using a pseudonym like “hunnybear” or “Iceman”, or foregrounded their circumstances over their name, as in the display name being used for messages like “i give up”, or “In the dominican republic” (all examples from Smale & Greenberg 2005, pp. 93–94). In this way, people on MSN augmented the pre-set available messages in far richer ways than the system was designed for, using names and pseudonyms to prompt conversation among their list of contacts, as well as acting as identity markers that create both emotional and competence displays (Aarsand 2008). Having an email address, or a simple first and last name, as a display name indicated that the person was unfamiliar with MSN conventions.



As Pål Aarsand (2008) explains, display names do more than just identify chat partners to each other; they also guide the interaction at hand through activity frames, which Goffman ([1974] 1986) describes as the finite set of rules through which meaning is gained from everyday interactions. The MSN display name “i give up”, for example, might have invited chat partners to ask about that person’s wellbeing, or offer support. Some display names required in-group knowledge to understand, or exhibited connections between other members of a peer group: friends and lovers often signalled intimacy between each other by having similar MSN names, using the same emoticon or format, or even copying each other’s names. Within the limited platform features, people were using pseudonymity practices to offer more information than just their first and last names in the display name field. One person in Smale and Greenberg’s (2005) study changed her display name so often that it became a record of her daily activities, using MSN like the social networking platforms to follow:

Changes would state particulars: when she was studying, babysitting, or watching TV, and her emotional reactions to these events. If she found something entertaining or interesting on TV, she would post quotes. If she was bored, she would put out a request for someone/anyone to call. In essence, this person used her display field as a web log, where she recorded and disseminated information to her community (Smale & Greenberg 2005, p. 93).

As platforms began offering features like the status update and personal icon to offer personalised profiles of people connected in networks, people drifted away from MSN. The chat program was phased out in 2013, with social networking sites taking advantage of the cultural shift and platform capabilities emblematic of Web 2.0, a discourse that will be explored in more detail in the following chapter. For now, I present an overview of the ways names, usernames, profiles, and pseudonymity function on platforms with social networking at their core.

**Social networking: Facebook, Friendster, Renren, Tencent QQ, and KakaoStory**

As this examination of earlier iterations of communication platforms has demonstrated, social network sites are built from features that people use to engage in identity work: the strategic presentation of the self for the purpose of interactions that maintain positive social value (Goffman 1967). People have long been able to choose their username, post text, images, and links, chat, and change their name and profile picture when they communicate online. But social network sites draw these features together and publicise the resulting networks of contacts and posted content in personal pages that much more closely resemble Goffman's (1963) object for biography, providing people with a record of social facts about themselves and others.

### *Early social network sites*

Customisable, personalised web pages have been available since at least 1996, when Geocities released browser-based tools and templates for networked personal websites that could be listed in directories (Stryker 2012). In 1997, Six Degrees introduced profiles and friend lists, and in 2002, Friendster became a social network that established certain social network site conventions, such as having people create profile pages. In a blog post from 2004 entitled, 'What the hell is up with Friendster?', blogger Alan describes the site as providing a personal page that gives you space to talk about yourself, from which you can connect with others if you know their email address or full name, which gives you your own personal network of people. The description was necessary; two years after Friendster was created, social media was still in its infancy, and Alan was just discovering it. Initially, many considered publicly displaying connections as 'friends' to be ostentatious: submitted definitions to the crowdsourced Urban Dictionary reveal much discomfort with the idea. chester (2004, n.p.) defines Friendster as "an online networking service for the people who dont have any friends and desparately asking to be someone's friend", and maddman (2003, n.p.) calls it a "Web to web of stupid idiotic individuals who thinks the number of of people in their friendslist is in proportion to their self worth".

In addition to these publicly listed connections, Friendster also allowed people to display their first and last names, with their unique login determined by their email address. Unlike the unique username required by bulletin boards and chat rooms, there could be multiple John Smiths on the same platform. While Marwick (2005) identified a large

proportion of Friendster profiles using sarcasm, irony, or fake information as resistance strategies, there were enough people using their real names for Alan to get frustrated when searching for his friends:

if your friends are stupid A-Holes, they didn't upload a picture of themselves. so, when you search for them, all you know is their name. So, you can search for John Smith, get 200 hits, but you don't know which one is your John Smith (Alan 2004, n.p.).

As non-unique usernames were the norm on Friendster, other details became more important: someone's photograph, their location, their place in a larger network of friends. Not knowing which John Smith was 'yours' is presented here as a difficulty to overcome, but non-unique usernames were about to become a feature of a host of other social media platforms, including LinkedIn, which was created in 2003, Facebook in 2004, and Twitter in 2006.

*Facebook, face-work, giving impressions, and managing regions*

Although Facebook allowed people to be found only by their first and last names from 2004 to 2009, Facebook usernames were introduced in 2010 which assign a unique username as part of the web address of a Facebook page, in order to make it easier to find friends with common names (Chan 2009). Facebook explains that "usernames and User IDs are part of your Public profile. We use this information to help people find you and to organize your information internally" (Facebook 2016). Although usernames, whether unique or not, still form the central point for other identity information to be connected to, social networking platforms are designed as profiles. Facebook began as a closed system that only offered membership to people with Harvard University email addresses (boyd & Ellison 2007), an online version of Harvard's face books: directories of students, with their names and photographs, designed to facilitate social interactions between them. Facebook gradually became less exclusive over 2005, expanding to other universities, high schools, and corporate networks, and finally becoming open to anyone with an email address (boyd & Ellison 2007). While these origins explain Facebook's

decision to instigate a real-name policy, as it became less exclusive the real-name policy no longer seemed to fit, according to Stryker (2012).

Instead of only having other university students in the audience on Facebook, since late 2005 a Facebook audience may consist of friends from different parts of someone's life, friends of friends, acquaintances, family, and colleagues. Goffman's (1967) concepts of face-work and front region management provide useful ways to discuss the challenges of staying in control of social media performances when multiple audiences are present. Papacharissi (2009) draws on Goffman's ([1956] 1990) explanation of impressions 'given' deliberately and 'given off' accidentally in order to argue that on Facebook, people have time to craft their status updates and posts, meaning they have a high degree of control over their performances, and so aren't likely to 'give off' much unintentionally. But people make mistakes. Just because people can choose what they post about themselves doesn't mean they completely avoid impressions given off: leaving location information turned on while updating a status could reveal someone to be at the beach instead of at home on a sick day; a toilet seat in the background of a selfie can spoil a glamorous pose.

Trottier (2012) has also found that young people play with the idea of giving off impressions, because indifference has high social capital. Being able to post a status update on Facebook that is simultaneously delivered to everyone's newsfeed and to no-one in particular is a way for young people to avoid seeming to care too much about their Facebook performance: they can act as though their post has simply given off an impression of earnestness. In Kath Albury's (2015) work on the way young people negotiate sexting, she reports that the sexual intent of an image is often downplayed by calling attention to another attribute, such as a new haircut that seemingly inadvertently featured pushed-up cleavage, or a girl in a bikini nonchalantly captioning the photo, "just going to the beach!" These strategies take advantage of how photos can include impressions given off.

Another way social media performances can be compromised is by the actions of others: David Brake (2012) warns that although people are interested in preserving what Goffman calls 'face', the internet doesn't allow control over the reception of their performances. Posts can easily be spread beyond their intended audience, taking them out of context. Audiences are immensely influential to how people represent themselves on social media and what they post. Since Goffman has established that people adapt their behaviour based on who is in the audience, Eden Litt (2012) argues that, in the

absence of knowing exactly who sees each post, people attend to an imagined audience. When an actual audience is not physically present, as in Goffman's original work on self-presentations, people imagine one to use as a guide in their absence (Litt & Hargittai 2016). Audiences make performances meaningful, and pseudonyms are often used to compartmentalise audiences, resulting in interactions that better abide by Goffman's rules of interaction.

As will be explored in Chapter 5, 'Pseudonymity practices', people use multiple platforms and strategic self-presentation to best communicate with their imagined audiences. For example, using a full name on LinkedIn, first and middle names on Facebook, and a pseudonym on Reddit means that only results about someone's professional life are returned if someone searches for them online. Even within Facebook, it is possible to use pseudonyms to address different audiences: while someone may use their full name on Facebook, within a group chat on the Messenger application they can choose the nickname their friends have for them to set a casual tone for the chat. While front-region management through pseudonym practices is not foolproof, it is often employed in managing multiple audiences. Names and pseudonyms play out differently when audiences and presentations of the self come from varied cultural contexts. As Hinton and Hjorth (2013) argue, social media is a global phenomenon and considering a variety of platforms can be a helpful way of rendering familiar social media practices unfamiliar. Facebook looms large in the public imagination and, although social network sites thrive globally, they are often directly compared to Facebook. This provides an entry point for discussing local social network sites, but may also flatten out some of the specificities of platforms designed for different languages, cultures, and contexts.

### *Identity work on global social media*

Facebook commands much popular and scholarly attention: in an article titled 'Facebook is eating the internet', the journalist Adrienne LaFrance calls it "the dominant force in American media" (LaFrance 2015, n.p.), and Ralf Caers et al. describe Facebook as "one of the most important social trends of the past decade" (Caers et al. 2013, p. 983). Weiyu Zhang describes Chinese social networking site Renren as "a Facebook-type SNS" (Zhang 2016, p. 89), although he also argues that our understanding of the cultural

diversity and complexity within social media is hindered by reducing the phenomenon to a small number of successful platforms. Renren has followed a similar trajectory to Facebook. It was launched in China in 2005 under the name Xiaonei, meaning ‘on campus’, because membership was restricted to college students, and rebranded to Renren, meaning ‘everyone’ (Zhang 2016). Like Facebook, Renren requires people to use their real names, but unlike Facebook, certain words and phrases are censored by the Chinese government, which has prompted people to develop Renren-specific practices such as using homophones and other codes to avoid being censored (Fossati 2014).

Further studies compare Facebook use with a range of platforms: Li Xiaoqian and Chen Wenhong (2014) found that Chinese international students in the US use both Facebook and Renren to keep in touch with friends in host and home countries; Chen Zhao and Gonglue Jiang (2011) reveal that Chinese people on Renren are more likely to customise their profile images than Americans using Facebook; and Sang Woo Lee and Jiyoung Lee (2017) discovered that KakaoStory in Korea features more posts with images and emoticons, and more family members than friends, when compared with Facebook. Even within Facebook, culturally specific practices around naming have emerged. Ming-Shian Wu (2016) observes four distinct types of Facebook naming practices in Taiwan: someone might have their official name in Chinese, their romanised official name (Wu gives the example of Shu-Hao Lin), an English first name with a romanised surname (Jeremy Lin), or a nickname (Lintendo). These practices exist within the bounded context of Facebook, where a real-name policy formally forbids these kinds of names from being used.

Outside Facebook, social media users in China are much more likely to have profiles on Tencent QQ and its chat app, WeChat, without their real names and photos, according to a comparative study by Miller et al. (2016). The study found that social media in China is not generally based on real names, which tend to signify work accounts. Pseudonymous profiles across a range of platforms let people make connections with strangers, practise freedom of speech, play games, and talk about their dreams, worries, and other secrets, without harming their reputation. In Turkey, admitting to having a profile without a real name is outside the norm. Researchers note that it was unlikely for a person surveyed in Turkey to reveal that they had a pseudonymous profile, because this was tantamount to declaring they were hiding something (Miller et al. 2016).

Cultural contexts influence how ‘real’ a name is, argues Wu (2016). As global social media services proliferate, so too do the username practices and conventions across them.

## Conclusion

This chapter has studied platform developments based on Goffman’s theories of interaction and the presentation of the self. In doing so, it has demonstrated that pseudonymity practices have always been part of internet communication, and establishes that pseudonyms are an essential way in which people seek context when grappling with the multiple audiences often present on communication platforms. Any understanding of social media is necessarily context-specific. It is important to develop an understanding of social media that goes beyond the stereotyped notion of being an Anglophonic domain populated by young people engaging in banal conversations (Hinton & Hjorth 2013), just as it is important to recognise that social media does not begin and end with a Facebook profile. There are myriad factors that influence self-presentation on social media, including nationality, culture, age, gender, occupation, socioeconomic status, attitude towards technology, level of digital literacy, access to devices, and interest in online communication. This chapter has focused on the development of communication platforms as just one factor in identity work on social media.

Mapping the development of usernames from numbers to the name someone is known by online has demonstrated the many uses of pseudonyms. In addition to managing multiple front regions by speaking to different audiences in different contexts, usernames and pseudonyms have the capacity to add contextual information about a person; to signal institutional affiliations with email addresses; to demonstrate expertise with numbers of posts, comments, and votes on bulletin boards; to display points of interest when engaging strangers in conversation in chat rooms; and to show off in-group status to peers on chat programs used to keep in touch with friends. When Goffman begins *The presentation of self in everyday life* ([1956] 1990), he claims that people enter interactions armed with information about someone, or else seeking information about someone. Social media conventions such as asking for an a/s/l (age, sex, and location), reading the personal circumstances that begin a greentext story, or

looking up someone's birthdate on their Facebook profile all function as part of this information-seeking process. These are all ways in which people rely on established cultural expectations and rituals around sociality when they interact with someone online.

The next chapter discusses the way norms around identity work on social media have shifted from mostly pseudonyms to mostly real names through the Web 2.0 discourse of interactivity. As Web 2.0 has taken hold, identity on social media increasingly involve multimedia profiles, meaning usernames have become more persistently attached to other kinds of information, including profile pictures and connections to other people. Most importantly, these kinds of profiles mean that pseudonyms have stopped being the norm, in favour of the real-name web (Hogan 2013). Because several major social media platforms now provide templates in which to record one's real first and last names, the implications of this decision deserve scrutiny.



## CHAPTER 3

### Web 2.0 and the real-name web

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#### Introduction

The previous chapter has presented iterations of online communication platforms, and demonstrated that pseudonym practices have been a key part of such platforms since the early days of the web. In this chapter, I narrow the focus to the communicative mechanisms of Web 2.0, and build on the examples of platforms to make a case for why pseudonyms matter, even on platforms with policies against them. I study Web 2.0 discourse and the way platforms, policies, and profiles within it are set up to harvest the data generated by profiles and interaction for commercial gain. Alongside Web 2.0 has come a push towards people including increasingly granular details about themselves in social media profiles, particularly their own names. But my investigation of the real-name web has led me to platforms and practices that thrive outside it, including pseudonymous and alternative platforms, some of which allow people to communicate without a name at all.

As stated in my thesis proposition, anonymity is not something a platform can simply offer or ban. Instead, people engage in identity work by strategically revealing things about themselves, and their position in various social groups, when they communicate and make connections. I here present some criticisms of the nationwide real-name verification systems implemented by South Korea and China to demonstrate that such totalising real-name policies harm communicative freedoms, and I explore some of the claims that platforms that let people send targeted messages to others without including a name at all are facilitating bullying and abuse. As I touched on in the introduction, discussions of social media anonymity bring up themes of freedom versus harm, and here I highlight that any platform that attempts to strike a balance between these two outcomes is embarking on a complex endeavour. The three case studies that follow each focus on specifics of the ongoing negotiations involving pseudonymity affordances, practices, and disruptions, but first, this chapter demonstrates that neither a web of real

names nor a web of no names is sufficient for social media to allow an exploration of identity.

I begin with an exploration of the way Web 2.0 is used to describe an environment in which profiles are the centre of social media networks. In a prescient article for *Print* magazine, the technology designer Darcy DiNucci introduced the term 'Web 2.0':

The Web, as we know it now, is a fleeting thing. Web 1.0. The relationship of Web 1.0 to the Web of tomorrow is roughly the equivalence of Pong to *The Matrix* ... The first glimmerings of Web 2.0 are beginning to appear, and we are just starting to see how that embryo might develop ... The Web will be understood not as screenfuls of text and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens (DiNucci 1999, p. 32).

From the early 2000s, the internet became more common in schools, workplaces, and households, faster to access, and capable of hosting increasing amounts of data. This shift in internet development and culture became known as Web 2.0, after this pronouncement by DiNucci. The '2' marks a new kind of internet (Hunsinger & Senft 2013; Paasonen 2010; van Dijck 2013b), as internet use had changed from browsing static content to uploading content and receiving, interacting with, exchanging, and remixing the content from others. Tim O'Reilly describes Web 2.0 by listing examples: Wikipedia instead of Britannica Online, participation instead of publishing, tagging instead of directories (O'Reilly 2012). The web shifted away from text-based communication to multimedia profiles that provide pre-determined categories for people to fill out with information about themselves.

### **Social media shifts with Web 2.0**

As touched on briefly in the introduction of this thesis, 'Web 2.0' has been criticised as a contentious, imperfect term (Beer 2008; Lovink 2011), as being a marker of the increasingly commercial imperatives of social media sites (Fuchs & Sandoval 2013; Gehl 2011), and not even giving rise to completely new ways of being online. In an article

outlining key differences between Web 1.0 and 2.0, Graham Cormode and Balachander Krishnamurthy (2008) argue there is a clear separation between Web 2.0 platforms like Facebook and YouTube, and what they call the old web. They contend the essential difference is that content creators were scarce in Web 1.0 and most people consumed content, while in Web 2.0 anyone can be a content creator. But in the 2010s, email and information search are still the most popular online activities (Fuchs et al. 2013), and crowdsourced or user-generated content has existed from the earliest days of the web; indeed, according to Baym (2011), all the content on the web before the mid-1990s would now be referred to as user-generated. Web 2.0 content is only thought of as user-generated because content production has come to be dominated by an established class of professional content providers (Baym 2011). And just as people who were not professionals generated content in the 1980s and 1990s, there are people who only browse and never post in the 2000s and 2010s (Allen 2012). Even if the idea of Web 2.0 represents a change in the internet, this change hasn't happened at the same time for everyone.

But Web 2.0 can be a useful way of describing how broad patterns of internet use have developed over time. van Dijck (2013b) identifies Web 2.0 as both an ideological and a technological foundation for the internet, and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest social media is a group of applications that builds on this foundation. Although social sites involving interaction have long been part of the online experience, Web 2.0 conceptually extends interactivity to being a core feature of the internet. Wesch (2007) argues that an essential feature of Web 2.0 is a coding language called eXtensible Markup Language or XML, which means people didn't need to learn complicated code, but can instead rely on platform interfaces to provide the necessary tools for creating and uploading content. Web 2.0 is not necessarily a technology, but a discourse through which people have made sense of this changing internet.

Matthew Allen (2012) argues that Web 2.0 draws on the concept of versions, as it was introduced using the same vocabulary a technology company might use to unveil a new product. He claims the idea of a new version of the internet means social media corporations can promise familiarity along with a smooth transition to something new. All this change has brought about new opportunities to interact, but the platforms offering uploads, automated sharing buttons, and profiles do so in order to monetise content, communication, and identities (van Dijck 2013b). According to Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013), Web 2.0 has become a set of corporate practices

that seek to exploit participatory culture, with companies enabling once-private communication to become more public and more formally articulated. While people still desire social connections, they build them by taking on corporate logics such as measuring the way others engage with them, like a television executive recording ratings (Jenkins, Ford, & Green 2013). Interfaces that give people options to like status updates or share content to their own pages are also means to create relations between people and web objects that become data to be tracked and sold by the companies that operate these platforms, argue Carolin Gerlitz and Anne Helmond (2013).

But how has Web 2.0 fostered a culture of real names? Marwick's book *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age* (2013c) discusses how Web 2.0 produces subjects. Marwick argues that social media is intrinsically focused on individuals, with the profile as the key unit of Web 2.0. For Marwick, Web 2.0 embeds neoliberal, corporate logics into the way people present themselves through social media and socialise, as they are harnessing marketing techniques to become the ideal Web 2.0 subject: one that is highly visible and self-configured to be watched and consumed by others. Markers of high status in social media, often numbers of friends, followers, and likes, usually benefit technology companies as well as sustaining neoliberal discourse. Marwick argues that part of participating in Web 2.0 culture involves having a verifiable identity, as this makes it possible to leverage social status across websites, while making it simple for platforms to track people as they move across the web. Senft (2013) also says people engage in identity work that presents a version of themselves in line with neoliberal logics, arguing people who curate the status updates and pictures that constitute their public presence on a number of platforms are undertaking a kind of labour associated with the audience-segmentation strategies of celebrities in late capitalism.

Marwick's (2013c) and Senft's (2013) work on this culture of using real names on social media, as well as Hogan's (2013) claims of a real-name web, prompted me to interrogate real-name platforms and the place of pseudonymity within social media.

### **The real-name web**

Hogan (2013) claims that most social media platforms foreground real names. He argues that real-name policies on platforms like Facebook and Google+ aren't just ideological

principles but business decisions, as data is more valuable to advertisers if it can identify and target specific individuals. The shift to the real-name web has happened over time, with popular platforms moving away from pseudonymity, so that more platforms like Facebook exist, fundamentally grounded in the idea that people have one identity (Knuttila 2011). Marwick claims that platforms' asking people to provide real names incorporates an ideal of transparency directly into the platforms. It creates more accurate data, which can be sold to advertising companies, and it is "rooted in a particular Silicon Valley belief that computers will flatten hierarchy and increase democracy, making pseudonymity or anonymity unnecessary" (Marwick 2013c, p. 70). According to Hogan (2013), corporations like Facebook continually seek ways to assert their legitimacy through platform interfaces and policies. The way Facebook makes implicit claims about identity has led Shanyang Zhao, Sherri Grasmuck, and Jason Martin (2008) to describe it as a 'nonymous' platform, the opposite of an anonymous one. David Auerbach argues that the semi-anonymous, written discourse of the early web has largely been superseded by platforms in which people cultivate more permanent identities:

Today, the most ubiquitous online communities are social networks where our identities are mostly known and mostly persistent. Each tweet, each status update, is branded with a persistent name or affiliation (Auerbach 2012, n.p.).

He notes that within this culture of real identities, there exist platforms that facilitate a thriving pseudonymity, a claim I return to later in this chapter. For now, I highlight that Auerbach sees a transition from a largely pseudonymous to a largely named social media culture; he understands pseudonymity as something that was far more common "before so much of our social and professional lives became conducted on the Web" (Auerbach 2012, n.p.). Grant Bollmer (2016) has noted a similar trajectory. He, like Marwick (2013c), believes the disclosure of personal data is a necessity under capitalism, a context which demands that people perform a full, totalising, truthful performance of their identity if they wish to be included in social life online:

The emerging discourse about online identity is that the anonymity of the internet so celebrated in the 1990s should be eliminated in the name of civility and community (Bollmer 2016, p. 169).

For Bollmer, strategies that involve being pseudonymous, or disconnecting, are being invalidated as the tools of frauds and liars, even though this discourse denies the complexity of everyday life. The popularity of pseudonymity is waning in the face of social networking and microblogging, he suggests.

Hogan gives three main reasons for the receding of pseudonyms within the real-name web, all related to the growth of internet access and development. He claims the web is no longer simplified but detailed, referring to the increase in multimedia content across it: “As text gives way to photos, audio, and video, the chasm between a pseudonym and a persona becomes wider” (Hogan 2013, p. 299). He argues that the web is no longer strange, but a densely connected, day-to-day technology in most developed nations. This claim is supported by available data: while about half, or 47 per cent, of the global population has internet access according to the International Telecommunications Union (2016), people in countries with high internet penetration rates also seem to have high social media usage rates: a Pew Research Center study shows that of the 86 per cent of Americans who use the internet, 79 per cent of them use Facebook and more than half use multiple platforms (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan 2016). Facebook, a platform with a real-name policy, is dominant in the American social media market, and this gives weight to Hogan’s claim that there is an expectation of real names within this cultural context. But in other parts of the world, like South Korea and China, use of real names has been mandated by governments. The consequences of real-name verification systems have demonstrated that an imposed real-name web can hinder communicative freedom.

South Korea implemented a system that involved people having to verify their real names and resident registration numbers before they could post to sites with over 100,000 daily visitors. The law ostensibly addressed the spread of misinformation and harassment but, according to legal scholar John Leitner (2009), it also distinguished Korea as having an internet more restrictive than in many other democratic nations. The real-name system has been criticised for violating citizens’ privacy (Ramstad 2012); being ineffective at preventing online slander; driving people to overseas websites,

thereby disadvantaging local services (Lam 2012); and damaging security, as 35 million Korean people had their personal information stolen while the system was in effect (Caragliano 2013). In 2012, the law was abolished when the Constitutional Court ruled it an unconstitutional infringement of free speech (Kim 2016). Since social media had grown, the system had been undermined by people using global platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, and the government had struggled to police workarounds like people choosing different countries as content preferences on YouTube so they could upload videos and comment. The President's Office even revealed the futility of the law when it used the same method to upload President Lee Myoung Bak's speeches to YouTube, prompting widespread criticism from citizens.

Although Kim (2016) warns that the Korean experience of real-name verification systems should serve as a lesson to governments, which ought to be circumspect about internet regulation, the same year that Korea abolished the law China began requiring people to register with their real names before using microblogs. This real-name verification system has been described as "a finger-print that serves as an identifiable mark left behind in everywhere we visited" (Fong et al. 2012, p. 83), and is unpopular with people who use microblogs: 64 per cent of Sina Weibo users were found to be against the system (Fong et al. 2012). The move did not surprise the communications expert Mike Yao, who claims the Chinese government has historically sought to control all kinds of communication, and that microblogs like Sina Weibo and Tencent were targets because they are major sources of commentary (Yao in Ide 2012). David Caragliano (2013) argues that, a year after the real-name verification system was introduced, protests and activism that challenged the hash law indicated it was misguided. It would be a costly endeavour to successfully implement such a system across the entire Chinese internet, and the move would likely degrade its content in the eyes of the people using it (Caragliano 2013).

The backlash to these real-name verification systems has implications for broader understandings of social media pseudonymity. These systems are enforced unevenly. In some cases, as when Google blocked uploads and comments from people who set their location to South Korea, the law was easily circumvented by manually changing that setting. But it seems that on other parts of the web, the real-name verification system has had a considerable effect on speech. From the Korean Constitutional Court ruling that such systems are unconstitutional (Kim 2016), it can be seen that these laws unfairly restrict speech and limit participation. Ultimately, the real-name verification

system in South Korea was overturned and there is considerable pushback to the current laws in China. Real-name verification systems are one way of introducing a culture in which people attach their real names to their online communication; a culture of profiles is another.

But no matter what kinds of laws, policies, or affordances are made about real names, there will always be resistance in the form of pseudonymity, as I will show in Part 2 of this thesis.

### **Profiles on Web 2.0 social media**

Social media profiles are designed with provided categories for people to input a host of personal information. While I have discussed some of the kinds of identity work people engage in to cope with collapsed audiences in the previous chapter, I now consider the profile as a key aspect of Web 2.0. Profiles build on the buddy lists and chat groups that formalised connections to friends in earlier iterations of web communication, and realise them in a context in which major platforms are lucrative businesses, as they draw on this personal information to target people for advertising.

After choosing a name, the social media profile varies in detail – on Reddit, only a username and password are required to set up an account, and information about Redditors is displayed as a list of their posts and comments in chronological order. On Twitter, there are eight fields to fill in: username, name, profile photo, header photo, biography, location, website, and birthdate. Facebook has a far more complex online profile, with sub-categories inside categories: overview, work and education, places you have lived, contact and basic information, family and relationships, details about you, and life events. Facebook is especially determined to gather as much information about a person as it can, beginning with their full name. The homepage prompts people to enter this information in sign-up boxes, and this appears to be a step in registering an account when in fact these details automatically become part of the profile (Light & McGrath 2010). The details on someone's profile are available in the background of social media encounters. In a text-based chat room, someone's age, gender, interests, and other details are revealed through conversation, and can thus be tailored for each interaction. When chatting with close friends, someone might reveal different interests than when chatting to someone they have just met, or are trying to impress. Profile



elements give clues about a person that are usually gathered through conversation (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld 2007), as in the question ‘a/s/l?’ discussed in the previous chapter. But profiles exist as records of personal information that can be referred to before engaging with someone by posting a meme on their Facebook wall that aligns with their interests, or wishing them a happy birthday on Twitter.

As the previous chapter has explored, social media profiles are important sites for identity work, because they express certain facets of a person through the personal information they include. boyd writes that “one cannot simply ‘be’ online; one must make one’s presence visible through explicit and structured actions” (boyd 2007, p. 145). One important way of becoming visible on social media is through the profile picture, which, along with a name, accompanies all the actions taken on platforms. Journalist Brian Moylan claims that choosing a profile picture is serious business: “The image you project is entirely determined by your photo choice” (Moylan 2010, n.p.). It is considered important to show a picture of your own face; in the following passage from a satirical book listing reasons why social media platforms “suck”, the author laments those who choose not to feature a photo of themselves on Facebook:

Hell-o. This is FACEbook, folks. Face. Book. As in, you need to show us your face ... when you only have one profile shot and it’s of a storm trooper, it makes me wonder if you’re either (a) a vampire and you can’t have your photo taken or (b) one of those weird voodoo people who believe that having their photo taken steals their soul (Randazza 2009, p. 122).

Her derision of people who choose to subvert the expectations of a profile is similar to Moylan’s: he claims people with pop culture references as profile photos have no personality of their own, and have chosen to define themselves by their entertainment choices instead. Both writers maintain there is a norm around including real information on profiles. If people do not conform to the profile layout, Facebook may punish them by suspending their profile – but other people on the platform may exert social pressure, too. On the real-name web, there is the expectation that people will provide personal details that fit the questions being asked, which of course are being asked to elicit answers that will benefit the platform. When Facebook gives members options to choose from via drop-down menus, rather than allowing them to write an

open-ended biography or fill in boxes as they wish, the goal is making data organisation more manageable for the platform owners (Bucher 2012) by separating people into sociodemographic and geodemographic categories for commercial reasons.

But this also has the unintended consequence of forcing people into sociopolitical categories. Baym (2011) claims the predetermined categories that platforms provide through their profile templates both shape and constrain identity construction, revealing taste categories that are shaped by social class, as well as limiting people in their racial categories. Nakamura (2002) calls these ‘menu-driven identities’ a way to force reductive and archaic definitions of race on people, erasing ethnicities that don’t fit neatly into clickable boxes. This narrowing of subject positions defies claims that social media allows for a fluid, free, unbounded sense of identity, instead marginalising “unclickable, hyphenated, hybrid, ‘messy’ kinds of racial, gendered, and sexual identity” (Nakamura 2002, p. 120). Providing information in clickable boxes is part of the quantification of the self; it feeds into algorithms that automate further product and content recommendations, based on the similarity of profiles to others in the network (Galloway 2004).

Along with names and photos, Facebook profiles feature lists of likes, which form connections to interests, products, brands, and celebrities, building up what Hugo Liu (2007) calls ‘taste statements’. These are based on socioeconomic and aesthetic influences, and convey personality, while reflecting consumer culture by focusing identity on purchasable goods. This method of assembling an identity by combining found objects and cultural references bears a similarity to sociologist Dick Hebdige’s (1987) concept of style as bricolage: drawing on connections between things to create new meanings. When people use their social media profile to display their interests and thus their personality and identity through bricolage, they are identifying their belonging to certain categories, claims Marwick (2013a), such as ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality, class, and ability.

Likes on Facebook are a way of linking people to things, which Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) theorise as the Like economy. They argue that the web has moved from measuring engagement in hits and links towards social buttons (liking and sharing), which create an infrastructure that enables data, traffic, affect, connections, and money flows from social media platforms across the web. This allows all kinds of data to be linked to individual profiles. And profile logics are being embedded into other kinds of

web activity: soliciting data from individuals through various interface prompts and then commodifying this data are becoming inscribed in other systems (van Dijck & Poell 2016). Wearable technology encourages people to create fitness profiles; loyalty programs for stores and brands incorporate shopping profiles into their signup processes; and, as touched on in the introduction, companies like Google are building profiles about people even without their consent (Angwin 2016; Mayer-Schönberger 2009). However, while profiles are increasingly becoming entrenched in the online experience, with people and platforms pressuring others to fulfil expectations of use, some internet users have always found ways to resist, play with, and thwart expectations around including their real information.

Although they flout Facebook's real-name policy, there are still plenty of active pseudonymous accounts. A friend might change their surname to their middle name to avoid being easily searched for, or use a pseudonym, but because you can see a picture of them and who they are connected to, they are still identifiable to others in their network. Similarly, changing a profile picture to something other than a face – an animal, a pop culture reference, a place, a design, a cause – means people can still be recognised. In an exploration of uploading false information to social media, Reading (2009) found that a quarter of Facebook profile pictures aren't the subject's face: her study included profile pictures of a vase of flowers, a child's drawing, and a picture of an alien. Reading argues that this may be a result of ignorance around Facebook's policy, which states that people are required to provide true information, but it is more likely to be a conscious effort to manage the boundaries of being under constant surveillance by Facebook friends. Although norms around social media use are always changing, when Mónica Aresta et al. (2015) conducted a study on profiles six years later, they concluded that profile photos that don't show a person's face, along with pseudonyms and multiple accounts, are strategies to combat the permanence of digital environments and to gain control over the information that is associated with their online self. Another way to manage the often overlapping boundaries of social media is to eschew named sites altogether, in order to communicate pseudonymously, whether with friends or strangers.

### **Resistance to the real name web: Pseudonymous and alternative social media**

Within the real-name web, there are platforms on which pseudonymity thrives. Auerbach calls this ‘A-culture’, the A referring to ‘anonymous’: “the intentional disconnect between one’s real life and one’s online persona (or, frequently, personae)” (Auerbach 2012, n.p.). For Auerbach, A-culture is exemplified by 4chan, mentioned earlier in this thesis as a bulletin board that explicitly fosters pseudonymity. Auerbach argues that the A-culture of 4chan appears anarchic, but is in fact carefully bounded play. Instead of people forming networks based on their identities and personalities, platforms like 4chan tend to be focused on interests. The ephemerality of conversations, with posts disappearing within hours or minutes if they are not commented on, engenders a common language of pop culture references and memes: a set of in-jokes and references that come to constitute a collective memory that can be drawn on for communication.

Milner (2013) calls this ‘pop polyvocality’: a common tongue that facilitates the engagement of many voices. It’s a way for people to operate with an understanding that the main audience of the platform comes from similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, meaning that even when they cannot be individually identified, members feel they are part of a similar, if loosely connected, group. Platforms specifically designed for anonymity and pseudonymity tend to emphasise confession rather than connection – sharing private thoughts to strangers through a common language, rather than updating followers and friends – although some such platforms let people send unidentifiable messages to those already in their networks. Pseudonymous social media is a response to, and a rejection of, the real-name web.

### *Social media without names: Pseudonymous platforms*

While anonymous social media platforms: allow people to address context collapse by speaking to different audiences; act as an emotional outlet by letting people discuss personal issues without reputation damage; and provide support and validation for feelings and experiences based on short-lived connections (Kang, Dabbish, & Sutton 2016), they have also been associated with facilitating abuse, bullying, and harassment because of their lack of accountability. PostSecret, a community art project featuring secrets on decorated postcards that are sent to an address in Maryland, US, formed the basis of the PostSecret app created in September 2011 so people could upload their

secrets instead of physically mailing them. In a trailer for the app, creator Frank Warren (2011 n.p.) claims people use it to share “soulful, sexual, and silly” secrets. On PostSecret, people share secrets by addressing them to ‘you’, which emphasises how intimate they are even as they are being shared publicly, and makes them confessional and revealing even as the author of the secret remains unknown (Kennedy & Milne 2013). After just three months, the PostSecret app was closed as it was found to be hosting too much abusive content: Warren reports that even the small proportion of “bad content” was too much for the team of volunteer moderators, as it was difficult to locate the contributors behind particular posts (Hernandez 2012). Warren reflects that companies have a “moral responsibility” to carefully monitor the content posted on similar apps, or else they will become unsafe environments (Dickey 2014 n.p.).

Other anonymous social media apps came to take PostSecret’s place, the most popular being Whisper (created in 2012) and Secret (2014), which host text posts that are overlaid onto images, then sent anonymously to a member base of thousands. The founders of Secret claim it is for authentic communication, with anonymity meaning it is a platform on which to “be yourself” (Newton 2014 n.p.). Hundreds more social media sites and apps with an explicit focus on anonymity have also emerged: Popcorn Messaging (2013), Yik Yak (2013), Spraffl (2013), and Rayzit (2014) use mobile phone location information to display anonymous messages and images to those who are nearby; Formspring (2009) and ASKfm (2010) are dedicated to asking and answering questions anonymously; Confide (2014) and 11Beep (2014) send anonymous messages that self-destruct after a designated period of time; Sneaky (2014) sends anonymous photos to mobile phone numbers; Chatroulette (2009) and Omegle (2009) randomly pair anonymous strangers for a conversation; and Cloaq (2014) randomly assigns identification numbers, then people can submit posts with titles, images, and text.

Although the appeal is being able to post messages without having them traced back to an account with more personal information on it, questions have been raised as to how secure the apps really are: security breaches have exposed the identities of people posting to Secret (Olson 2014) and Yik Yak (Reader 2014). Even when these platforms are functioning as they are meant to, they only offer the posters anonymity to other users. The terms and conditions on Whisper and Secret reveal that not only do the apps collect and sell all your personal data, but any content posted is persistent and can be sold (Knibbs 2014a). While no-one on the platforms can trace a message posted to Whisper or Secret, the people who created and maintain these apps have access to a

database of personal information that people submit through signing up to and using them: the apparent anonymity they provide is limited, conditional, and subject to security attacks. Secret closed in 2015, after 16 months, for similar reasons to the PostSecret app. According to Secret's founder, anonymity can lead to honest, open communication and creative expression, but it's also "the ultimate double-edged sword, which must be wielded with great respect and care" (Byttow 2015, n.p.).

Exploring platforms that are described as anonymous leads me back to my proposition: that anonymity needs to be reframed as pseudonymity, because anonymity is rarely found within social media platforms that require personal information like email addresses, usernames, and links to other platforms to sign up. In addition to this, a look at some of the ways people use social media without names attests to the wide variety of outcomes of pseudonymity: from bullying peers by sending them personal insults, to making short-term connections with strangers by posting and commenting on confessions.

Platforms that allow targeted messages from unknown sources are particularly susceptible to being used to bully and harass. ASKfm and Formspring – question-and-answer apps that people can use to send pseudonymous messages to their social media networks by linking them to their Facebook and Twitter accounts – have been accused of involvement in a number of suicides of young people. Bullying others with these apps was appealing to young people because it reinforced their own social status at the expense of someone else's, while abdicating responsibility (Nilan et al. 2015). Amy Binns (2013) claims the platform design of these apps facilitates bullying, because people felt deindividuated while communicating anonymously with members of their peer group. Deindividuation is a psychological theory stating that when people are anonymous, they are primed to behave antisocially, because they feel that responsibility for their actions is diffused among a large group of potential harassers (Postmes, Spears & Lea 1998).

The same authors who proposed SIDE in the late 1990s have since repositioned the theory to downplay anonymity and highlight conformity to crowd behaviour instead. They argue that within new media communication, the norms associated with particular social contexts influence the behaviour of individuals (Spears & Postmes 2015), meaning platforms that host negative discourse are implicitly sanctioning nastiness. The effects of anonymity and group norms on aggressive language were explored by Leonie Rösner and Nicole Krämer (2016), who conducted a laboratory experiment by asking soccer fans

to comment on a soccer blog. While they note that the laboratory setting was a limitation, as the participants knew their response was being recorded, they discovered anonymity did not lead to more aggressive comments, but existing aggressive comments did.

Incidents of bullying and suicide have brought up questions of platform responsibility, with commentators suggesting that when people fight on pseudonymous platforms they drive traffic to them, potentially dissuading platform owners from intervening or creating necessary safety measures, since such actions could slow growth and profit (Newton 2013). Anthony McCosker (2016) sees a need to frame digital citizenship without overemphasising conflict and harassment, arguing that state regulation, educational programs, and platform features are all vital to cybersafety. McCosker argues that design decisions matter to how people experience platforms, a theme that will be expanded on in Chapter 4. Moderation is vital to fostering anonymous and pseudonymous platforms that are safe for people, and some platforms have made efforts to counteract the harassment that can occur. To avoid individuals being targeted, Whisper automatically flags posts that include proper nouns (unless they belong to public figures), and posts that indicate the author is suffering are watermarked with 'Your Whisper has been heard', directing the person who posted it to Your Voice, a mental health resource site founded by Whisper (Gannes 2013). Formspring has added safety tips and computer software that automatically flags inappropriate questions, and expanded the options so that people can choose to receive questions from anyone, only other Formspring users, only users with names, or only users on an approved list. It has also revised the terms-of-service document, absolving the company from liability to do with the conduct of other users (Marlin-Bennett & Thornton 2012).

Through automatically generating a code, symbol, or username, or displaying an inbox for private messages instead of a profile with personal details, these apps may seem grounded in an opposite ethos to that of platforms that emphasise identity. However, in reality they establish that identity work always involves an ongoing process of revealing *and* concealing. There are different dynamics taking place on these platforms: they do not facilitate harassment and abuse in a straightforward way, but neither do they only provide lighthearted, fun entertainment. As an example that echoes the greentext stories explored in the previous chapter, Whispers are short confessions that often reveal aspects about someone simply through the style of narration: "I don't know who my daughter's father is" lets the audience in on a few personal details, while the

following anecdote reveals quite a lot: “I’m a Marine home for the holidays, my parents see a ring on my finger and think I’m engaged. Tomorrow I will tell them it’s to a man; I’m gay!” (Notopolous 2013, n.p.). Just as there are people on Facebook who refuse to abide by the real-name policy, there are people on Whisper attempting to initiate conversation through the inbox feature: “Heyyyy so bored :/ hit me up. c: male 17 :p” (Notopolous 2013, n.p.), or even meeting and dating after connecting through a confession in common: a *Daily Dot* article documents an instance of someone posting a Whisper about their depression and receiving a sympathetic message that led to a chat, then a meeting, and eventually an engagement (McHugh 2014).

In another instance of ostensibly pseudonymous platforms leading to personal connections, a health support forum that recommends pseudonyms sees some participants divulge intimate personal details, or replace their avatars with personal family photos, some that include children in school uniforms with the logo of the school they attend (Rodan, Uridge, & Green 2010). This kind of resistance to established platform affordances has been called off-label use (Albury 2017; Bercovici 2014; Duguay 2016), as it involves using a platform in an unintended way. For my thesis, these are important parts of social media use: the ongoing negotiations that occur when people engage with social media. Platforms that are part of the real-name web might be designed for people to formalise connections and communicate civilly using their real names, but expectations around use will always be contested and resisted by some.

### *Social media without commercialisation: Alternative platforms*

Some social media platforms deliberately position themselves as alternatives to commercialised, real-name platforms, such as Diaspora, a decentralised social media site owned by its members, Ello, social media without advertising, and Imzy, a bulletin board created in 2015 by an ex-Reddit employee (Alba 2016). Diaspora was created as a response to the failures of real-name platforms like Google+ and Facebook, a move Robert Gehl (2015a, p. 64) calls “critically reverse engineering”. Alternative social media platforms seek to expose the shortcomings of corporate platforms by building an alternative that rectifies them. Diaspora addresses real-name policies in its own tutorial about how it works, claiming that although “a lot of networks insist that you use your real identity”, on Diaspora “you can choose who you want to be ... and you don’t have to



use your real name” (Diaspora 2015 n.p.). Robbie Fordyce and Luke van Ryn (2014) claim that Diaspora is both an ethical criticism of sites like Facebook, and a solution. Diaspora has politicised social media consumption, calling for an examination of values such as insisting on real names. Ello has also positioned itself as an alternative social site, with its terms of use stating that someone’s username “may or may not be your real name” (Ello 2015), and anonymising the data it collects.

Diaspora, Ello, and Imzy all recognise that real-name policies are restrictive, and they allow all kinds of names as a countermeasure. On Imzy, the naming policy states:

Create as many usernames as you need to interact in the way that fits you best (even anonymously!) ... You can interact safely and separately in all the ways you want (Imzy 2016 n.p.).

In this way, Imzy is challenging the power of Facebook and Google+ by affording pseudonymity in a dynamic way across the platform, rather than limiting members to one name that represents them in a particular, fixed fashion. Gehl (2015b) attributes this naming freedom to the non-corporate ideology of alternative social media, arguing that a key feature of many alternative platforms is their refusal to contribute to the corporate internet by selling personal data:

Since they are not invested in producing users-as-profiles which can be targeted by marketers, ASM [alternative social media] allow far more play with identity than in a site such as Facebook (Gehl 2015b, p. 7).

Sebastian Sevignani (2013) posits that people who turn to alternative social media are seeking a remedy for their discontent with the alienation and exploitation that are deeply embedded within the Facebook experience. He found that a small number of people responding to this by staying on Facebook but using false personal information, like pseudonyms or separate email addresses, something he calls “subversive usage” (Sevignani 2013, p. 332). It’s a trade-off strategy that marks the feeling of alienation while people continue to be part of the platform; a form of what Elija Cassidy (2016, p.

2626) describes as “participatory reluctance”: begrudging use of the parts of social media that someone doesn’t ideologically agree with.

Despite these alternatives to larger social media companies like Google+ or Facebook, Diaspora, Ello, and Imzy remain relatively sparsely populated. Technology journalist Chris Taylor (2014) argues that Ello is an ineffective social media site, but people joining, especially from the queer community, signal a profound discomfort with Facebook’s real-name policy. Ello’s main accomplishment isn’t replacing Facebook, but calling attention to its real-name policy as an inadequacy, and prompting it to soften the policy (Oremus 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Web 2.0 is a conceptualisation of the web in which corporately owned platforms featuring real names and formalised connections are the norm, while pseudonymity and ephemerality are not. This chapter has established that the real-name web has instigated a norm that people use their real names and photos on social media. But norms always involve resistance, and I have also paid attention to how people still hold on to their pseudonyms, including the anonymous social media platforms that have been developed in response. Since the end of 2015, some platforms have been offering more naming options for profiles. On Snapchat, people can rename their contacts, so people can more easily Snapchat with Mum or High School Scott. On Facebook Messenger, people can use different nicknames in every chat, and can change the nicknames of others. Imzy lets people sign in with one profile and create additional profiles when posting to different boards, and select the option to post anonymously (Imzy 2016). These moves all indicate that platform owners and designers are beginning to understand more about multifaceted identities and how they can be expressed. As Hogan argues:

What may be more interesting than the rise of the real-name web are the limitations of the real-name web and the reasons for the persistence of pseudonyms (Hogan 2013, p. 294).

Pseudonyms remain a key practice within social media, and this chapter has given evidence that pseudonyms enrich the communicative space of the internet by challenging the idea that real names equal authentic identities. Social media sites outside the real-name web, such as anonymous apps or platforms with affordances and norms for pseudonyms, demonstrate that identity does not end with boxes for first and last names with a real-name policy behind them. The publicly facing self is just one dimension of a dynamic, multifaceted person.

This first part of the thesis has addressed my first research question: How can choosing a name on social media establish contexts and connections? I have provided evidence that our understandings of social media pseudonymity are influenced by: historical traditions of how authorship is recognised; developments in communication platforms that are mutually shaped by people integrating their use into their identities and lives; and the push from commercial platforms towards connecting as much personal information as possible in order to harvest and monetise these connections as data. Presenting broad historical trajectories and contemporary trends that contribute to social media pseudonymity elicits questions about the specifics of how people engage in pseudonymity, and the implications of being pseudonymous.

To further investigate social media pseudonymity, this thesis now presents three case studies that each approach the subject from a different angle. The first case study is interested in affordances for pseudonymity, and how platforms are designed to encourage certain kinds of self-presentations. In researching the way Google+ has mandated real names by conducting a platform walkthrough of the signup process, I have discovered that, alongside the pseudonymous and alternative platforms that have been developed in response to the real-name web, there was a specific backlash to the policy known as the nymwars. A major concentration of this backlash occurred on protest website *My Name Is Me*, which I have systematically read to discover the main issues people have with real-name policies, and why they value pseudonymity.

Studying platform affordances, and perspectives on affordances, has led me to asking how people achieve pseudonymity on social media. The second case study turns from platforms to people. It focuses on what people *do* when they wish to become pseudonymous, taking a media practice approach to the study of pseudonymity practices on Reddit Gonewild, an exhibitionist forum in which people show off their bodies in sexualised self-portrait photographs. But pseudonymity practices are not necessarily

stable, which is why the third case study takes on the theme of disruption to investigate two pseudonymous people who were doxed by journalists, having their personal information revealed against their will.

Together, these case studies respond to this section on historical and contemporary forms of pseudonymity by shifting the focus from wider patterns to specific instances. I now move to the first case study, the nymwars, which regards pseudonymity as an affordance that is part of a platform's design. Whether or not a platform has affordances for pseudonyms impacts on the way people can engage in identity work while using it. But affordances are not fixed; they are ongoing negotiations between those who own, and those who use, the platform.

## PART 2

# Case studies of pseudonymity affordances, practices, and disruptions

## CHAPTER 4

# Pseudonymity as an affordance: People and platforms clash over identity politics in the nymwars

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### Introduction

As I have argued throughout Part 1 of this thesis, people are multifaceted and pseudonymity is a way of performing identity work on social media by compartmentalising aspects of identity to communicate with particular audiences. Social media platforms are designed to encourage certain kinds of identity presentations, and some insist that people use their real names. This chapter presents a case study of the backlash to Google+’s real-name policy, regarding pseudonymity as an affordance Google+ didn’t allow.

Google has struggled with its social media offerings, having launched and closed Orkut, Google Friend Connect, Google Wave, Google Buzz, and Google Circles (Fiegerman 2015). Google+ was released in June 2011 with a policy that states people had to use their “common name” when signing up: “the name your friends, family or coworkers usually call you” (Google 2013, n.p.). The initial aim of Google+ was to create a “social layer” (Gundotra in Bosker 2012) across its many other services including Gmail, Google Maps, and YouTube, using the Google+ profile as an access point. Although Google+ never formally articulated this, Google CEO Eric Schmidt called the platform an “identity service” (Schmidt in Carvin 2011) in a question-and-answer session at the 2011 Edinburgh International Television Festival. The admission made it seem like Google was in the business of identity gatekeeping and identity gathering, and had its own business interests at heart, at the expense of providing a customer-oriented service (Ingram 2011).

After Google+ began suspending people who were suspected of not using their real names, a movement against the real-name policy grew, comprising a hashtag campaign, articles, blogs, and protest website *My Name Is Me*. This movement is known as the

pseudonym wars, or nymwars: a moment in social media history when people demanded to be allowed to use pseudonyms. boyd calls Google+'s real-name policy "an abuse of power" (boyd 2011, n.p.), arguing that people use pseudonyms on social media because "they are looking to have some form of control over a social situation. To achieve that control, people must have agency and they must have enough information" (boyd 2012b, p. 30). By October 2011, the Electronic Frontier Foundation had published an article titled, 'Victory! Google surrenders in the nymwars' (Galperin & York 2011), which claims Google+ had revised its real-name policy to include pseudonyms – as long as they represented an "established identity" supported by official documents like driver's licences, or links to other social media accounts with a "significant following" (Google 2013 ). Three months later, the Electronic Frontier Foundation diluted its claims of a victory, calling Google+'s allowing of pseudonyms "a step in the right direction, not the end of the road" (Galperin 2012). Three years after the nymwars, in July 2014, Google announced: "There are no more restrictions on what name you can use. We know you've been calling for this change for a while" (Google+ 2014, n.p.). But as this chapter investigates, Google+'s interface still makes it difficult to input anything other than a first and last name during the signup process.

The previous chapter has discussed the real-name web (Hogan 2013), which involves increasing expectations that people use their real names on social media. Stryker (2012) points to the nymwars as the peak of the tension between pseudonymity and real names. He compares Google+'s real-name policy with Facebook's, noting that real names suit Facebook's original context of being a networking platform exclusive to a few Ivy League universities. Google+ first offered access to technology professionals, rather than university students, which Stryker argues are a "different breed ... tech-industry professionals possess a rich heritage of pseudonyms, handles, nicknames, and alternate identities" (Stryker 2012, p. 182). When Google+ first demanded, and strictly policed, real names in this context, there was an outcry.

This chapter extends Stryker's work by considering pseudonymity to be an affordance that Google+ didn't allow, instead restricting names to ones that appeared real. I consider how platforms are designed to benefit their owners through monetising the flow of content and communication, and how people can use their collective influence to respond to unwanted platform policies and designs, seeking control over their personal information. Backlash to policy changes is common on social media. Rules about online conduct are not simply imposed by platform owners, but negotiated between people and

platforms (Kennedy, Meese, & van der Nagel 2016). What made the nymwars such a compelling reaction to a platform restriction was that people argued that demanding real names was misguided and unfair, with little disagreement from anyone except platform owners themselves.

I locate the central platform feature of the nymwars as the two boxes presented to people for their first and last names on signing up to Google+, both of which had to be filled out before someone could progress to the next phase of signup. I map out the nymwars by drawing on platform policies, news articles, blogs, and academic work to illustrate the enduring importance of social media pseudonymity. I am especially interested in presenting the nymwars from the perspective of those using Google+. To fulfil this aim, I draw on statements made on the protest site *My Name Is Me* in 2011, and I conducted a follow-up survey in 2016 of the *My Name Is Me* contributors. I chose to examine Google+ during and after the nymwars because its real-name policy, and the way this was supported by the signup interface, represented a restriction instead of an affordance for pseudonymity.

This chapter investigates the way Google+ softened its stance on real names, most likely as a result of public pressure including the *My Name Is Me* movement, gradually allowing a broader range of names. Approaching social media pseudonymity with affordances in mind leads to better understanding of the ways platforms suggest and enable particular forms of interaction (Papacharissi 2009), and the negotiations people undertake when conducting identity work on these platforms. During the signup process, people contested the restriction on names by putting pseudonyms, nicknames, full stops, initials, and middle names into the boxes Google+ provided, and this either stopped them from being able to progress to the next phase of signup, or risked having their account suspended. Considering pseudonymity as an affordance means paying attention to platforms as cultural objects, and investigating the way people respond to its preferred pathways: a technological affordance can allow, encourage, request, or demand (Davis 2015).

## **Affordances**



Affordances are the possibilities for action found in the relationships between objects, environments, or technologies, and people (Evans et al. 2017). Psychologist James Gibson coined the term ‘affordance’ ([1979] 2014), arguing that affordances are not the inherent properties of objects, such as their colour, texture, size, and shape, but the potential actions they offer. Gibson is discussing the ways animals relate to natural environments, but his work has since been drawn on to analyse human-made objects, environments, and technologies. These might not have politics themselves, but they are embedded with the politics of their creators and contexts, argues Langdon Winner (1980). He gives an example: the overpasses to the parkways on Long Island in New York were built low, deliberately designed to discourage buses, reflecting the designer’s social class bias and racial prejudice. People of low socioeconomic status and racial minorities, who normally used public transport, were kept off these roads, limiting their access to Jones Beach. Objects, environments, and technologies do not often carry such malicious intentions, but they are designed with certain expectations in mind.

Ian Hutchby emphasises that affordances are relational, and the affordances of a technology may be different from one person to the next. Peter Nagy and Gina Neff (2015) contend that understandings and misunderstandings about platforms influence their use just as much as their design: some people think their Facebook newsfeed simply displays their friends’ posts in chronological order, rather than as an algorithmically curated mix. Each person may approach a platform with a different set of abilities, purposes, and expectations about what the platform does and how it works, which means everyone has their own imagined affordances. Although Twitter’s homepage prompts every user to enter a response to the query, “what’s happening?”, some people use Twitter to keep up to date with a list of news outlets and never make any tweets or attract any followers of their own. Within this chapter, I consider the affordances of pseudonymity on Google+, but I am discussing what this specific platform affords a certain group of people: those who possess the required devices, internet connections, leisure time, digital literacies, and inclination to access and operate the platform.

Studying social media involves an awareness of the multiple actors, components, and layers that constitute this communication technology. Owners, investors, designers, developers, programmers, researchers, and marketers collaborate to create a platform, the product of code and algorithms, that presents users with an interface within which to browse and create content. Janet Murray (2011) argues that platform design is a

cultural practice, and that a good interface doesn't call attention to itself but lets people focus on tasks. It is for precisely this reason that interfaces deserve critical attention: because they have the potential to go unnoticed, but they give people particular options while restricting others. According to Lev Manovich, platforms structure user experiences in unavoidably biased ways: "Far from being a transparent window into the data inside a computer, the interface brings with it strong messages of its own" (Manovich 2001, p. 65). These messages are part of the platform's design, which William Gaver explains using a restaurant metaphor:

The ways tables are laid out in restaurants, whether they are small and well-spaced, or arranged in long rows, will determine whether the space offers an intimate encounter or a convivial celebration (Gaver 1996, p. 127).

In a restaurant, objects like tables, menus, settings, and décor all influence the kinds of actions and interactions available. On a social media platform, the layout of the interface, images, boxes, buttons, and links are salient features. Bucher and Helmond (2017) attempt to clarify the difference between a Like button and an affordance, distinguishing between low-level affordances, which they call the buttons and screens located in the materiality of the medium, and high-level affordances, the dynamics and conditions enabled by platforms. But in a meta-analysis of scholarly works about affordances, Sandra Evans et al. (2017) disagree that platform features qualify. They give a set of criteria to determine whether a given instance is an affordance, asking researchers to confirm that the proposed affordance is not an object, a feature of an object, or an outcome, and that it has variability. They give an example: a smartphone's built-in camera is a *feature*, the fact of recordability is an *affordance*, and the documentation of human rights violations is an *outcome*. Affordances belong to the relationship between people and their environments, whether physical or digital. According to these criteria, the following are affordances: visibility, persistence, editability, and association (Treem & Leonardi 2012); spreadability and searchability (boyd 2014); and shareability (Papacharissi 2012). In their article, Evans et al. (2017) list anonymity as an affordance, because it is not an object, a feature, or an outcome, and people can vary in how anonymous they are.

An affordance approach to studying social media “captures the relationship between the materiality of media and human agency” (Bucher & Helmond 2017, p. 11). It is a useful middle ground between technological determinism and social constructionism (Hutchby 2001), because it implies neither that platforms are capable of exerting their will over people, nor that people can perform unlimited actions using platforms. Focusing on affordances is also a way to keep social media research relevant, as platforms change so quickly. Treem and Leonardi (2012) argue that scholarship which draws on an affordance approach builds theory about the relationship between technologies and people, and for Ellison and Jessica Vitak (2015), such scholarship allows researchers to go beyond documenting a platform and its members at a particular moment in time, and instead frames their insights in relation to broader patterns.

But platforms don’t just have affordances; they also have constraints. In taking an affordance approach, this chapter identifies a restriction: Google+’s first and last name boxes afforded a *lack* of pseudonymity. A platform that affords pseudonymity allows people to choose names without having a policy insisting that names be real. Features that afford pseudonymity vary: Reddit provides one box for unique usernames that are between 3 and 20 characters long and may contain letters, numbers, hyphens, and underscores; 4chan assigns every poster the username Anonymous and generates a 7-digit numerical code to distinguish between posters; and Imzy allows people to toggle between profiles for each thread they post in. All three platforms allow people to be pseudonymous. Google+, on the other hand, does not. Angela Cirucci (2015a; 2015b) illustrates the way Facebook doesn’t wish to afford pseudonymity, arguing that it compels people to perform a visible, unitary self through its real-name policy, stipulation that each person is only allowed to create one profile, and dominance of photos in the design of the interface. Platforms set parameters around what kinds of identification are possible, influencing how people can define and display aspects of themselves. Cirucci’s point is that platform design, presented to people through screens of boxes and buttons they can interact with, shapes engagement through calculated suggestions.

I build on Cirucci’s work by specifically considering the ways in which Google+ introduced a platform restriction on real names rather than providing the affordance of pseudonymity. In this thesis, I am concerned with the naming options a platform provides, how these are communicated by platform policies and features, and how people negotiate them. Social media use includes accepting *and* resisting the pathways a

platform offers. When Google+ demanded that real names be used on the platform, backlash was fierce: the nymwars were a retaliation against a platform restriction, and a push for the affordance of pseudonymity to be reinstated.

## **The nymwars**

Google+ initially restricted pseudonymity by not allowing people to progress through the signup process unless they filled in both the first and last name boxes, as my platform walkthrough in this chapter examines. The decision to design the interface in this way was explained in the platform policy, a set of rules that are usually created with the platform's intended audience, overall aims, and marketing strategy in mind. But real-name policies are mostly justified in terms of the ideology of their creator, despite the fact that social media sites are not owned and run by one person, but represent the interests of the shareholders and owners who profit from selling the data they collect. Zuckerberg and Schmidt were at the helms of Facebook and Google respectively in 2011, and both tended to function as site spokesmen. As such, their concept of how identity should be expressed manifested itself in the design of the platform and its rules.

This approach is so deeply entrenched that some commentators attribute ideologies to the site itself: "Influential industry players like Facebook argue that pseudonyms and multiple identities show 'a lack of integrity'" (Bernstein et al. 2011, p. 1). This sub-quote, which, as noted earlier, is from Zuckerberg, has now come to represent the entire site. The slippage between the ideology of a platform and that of a person is telling – as though an assumption that platforms have ideologies has been made. When debates over policies pertaining to identity can become so fierce they are referred to as 'wars', it must be recognised that these decisions come from people, and are neither neutral decisions, nor fixed. The kinds of policies that dictate what kinds of names are allowed on social media sites are not the final verdict of what can and cannot occur; more often, they become the standard from which to negotiate.

Users who flouted Google+'s real-names policy risked having their profile suspended until their name was verified through identification documents or links to accounts using their established pseudonym elsewhere on the internet. Google+'s policy explains that names must not be a secondary online identity, which effectively bans pseudonymity: the policy specifically warns that "your name may not represent ... an

avatar [or] gaming handle” (Google 2013). CEO Schmidt justified the real-name policy even though it had the potential to put some people at risk, telling these people not to use the site:

Google+ is completely optional ... We want people to stand for something. There are obviously people for which using their real name is not appropriate ... and if you're one of those people don't do it (Schmidt in Carvin 2011, n.p.).

This doesn't seem to be a satisfactory argument to justify not improving Google+. Cory Doctorow (2011) criticise Schmidt's statement, claiming that scrutiny should not be limited to mandatory services. The rules of Google+ matter to a lot of people, including Australian technology blogger Stilgherrian, who has a single name – a mononym – and had his account suspended when he put a full stop in the designated 'surname' field. He writes indignantly:

For all its engineering expertise, Google clearly has a thing or two to learn about human culture and customer service. Someone ought to tell it that when you open a conversation about something as personal as someone's name, you don't begin by telling them they're wrong and they have to change (Stilgherrian 2011 n.p.).

Another person whose Google+ account was suspended after they didn't adhere to the names policy was ex-Google employee Kirrily 'Skud' Roberts. Skud, a long-time advocate for pseudonymity, tried several times to get in touch with Google about her profile suspension. She set up an information page about her name, with links to sites where her username is Skud, evidence of her employment under Skud at Google including name badges, and testimonials about her name from friends and colleagues (Skud 2011a). One friend sarcastically alludes to the suspension when they write:

I know you as Skud from ... when I met you at OSCON and we had a discussion about open data standards ... I don't even remember your legal name, but I

suppose I could look it up, somewhere.. maybe I could Google it. Oh, yeah, I remember now (Lainchbury in Skud 2011a, n.p.).

After several attempts to submit the correct documentation, Skud emailed Google, copying in several ex-employees and Google management:

You need to fix this harmful, hypocritical policy and allow people to actually use ‘the names by which they are known’. Not just special-cases for celebrities and people who have friends at Google, but for everyone – transgender people, those from non-Western cultures, people with only one name, even people whose names you think look silly. Google shouldn’t be telling me what my ‘common name’ is or isn’t. It should be supporting me and validating my identity, so that I can use its services happily and encourage others to do so as well (Skud 2011b, n.p.).

Skud claims that simply not using Google+ was not a good enough option, pointing out that a wide range of Google services would be affected by her profile suspension (Skud 2011c). As a way to publicly communicate the importance of pseudonyms, and the failing of Google+ to address its naming policy, Skud published testimonials on the protest website *My Name Is Me: Be Yourself Online*, established in 2011.

## **Methods and ethics**

To investigate the nymwars, I performed a platform walkthrough of Google+ to gain a situated perspective of how choosing a name worked. I also archived the statements on the *My Name Is Me* website, and followed up with the people who had contributed to *My Name Is Me* with a survey about their attitudes to pseudonymity. I performed a thematic analysis on the 2011 statements and 2016 survey results in order to locate the main reasons behind the backlash to the restriction on pseudonymity. This involved reading the source material closely for meaning, then categorising it into thematically relevant chunks, which have then been refined through re-reading and re-categorising (Waller, Farquharson, & Dempsey 2016).

When collecting data from a variety of sources, it is important to consider the ethical impact of each component. All published work about the nymwars, including news articles, blogs, and academic articles, was publicly available, making it appropriate to use for research purposes. The people who made statements on *My Name Is Me* had been asked to contribute to a public protest site in their capacity as people with a stake in internet culture who could speak passionately and persuasively to a shared goal of changing real-name policies on social media, specifically Google+. In addition, this thesis aligns with the political purpose of *My Name Is Me*: advancing an argument that pseudonyms and anonymity are vital parts of being online. The site asked for contributions from people who could speak persuasively and with authority on the subject, with the goal of changing real-name policies.

My survey contacted the 49 people with publicly accessible contact information, so in this way they were informed that I was carrying out a research project using their initial comments. I received no replies indicating that anyone was uncomfortable with their statements being used for this purpose. I only contacted people with publicly accessible information, such as email addresses or accounts on Google+ or Twitter, which I found through online searches for their pseudonyms and/or names. The platform walkthrough doesn't contain any interaction with people, and is publicly available for anyone with a Google account, so describing details of the process doesn't pose any risk to people involved on the platform.

In order to get a sense of how Google+ operates as a platform, and to contribute my own experience of its naming policy, in August 2015 and again in November 2016, I followed the walkthrough method of Light, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay (2016). This method identifies an app's vision, operating model, and modes of governance, then systematically steps through and documents interfaces, features, and phases of use, revealing details about apps as cultural artefacts. A walkthrough engages directly with an app to examine the expectations that designers have for users. This method is intended to provide foundational data for a researcher to use in building an analysis of an app's intended purpose, embedded cultural meanings, and implied ideal users and uses.

This has given a situated description of where Google+ did and did not make changes following the nymwars, to highlight how the platform still reinforces the politics of real names, and to inform the survey questions and content analysis to follow. Before

beginning the walkthrough, I wanted a clearer picture of how the platform had changed since its original rollout – but it isn't easy to access previous versions of platforms. I found a YouTube tutorial from 2011 on Google+, when the platform could only be accessed via an invitation from a current member and the platform's tagline was "The Google+ project makes sharing on the web more like sharing in the real world". This tutorial demonstrated the signup process, showing someone logging in while commenting that people have to use their first and last names, and that "you should enter as much information as you possibly can, so your friends can find you easily" (Potash 2011). My 2015 and 2016 walkthroughs aimed to discover how Google+'s approach to identity had changed since then.

Moving from the platform's interface to attitudes regarding it, protest site *My Name Is Me* features anecdotes of personal experiences negotiating multiple, fluid identities online. The website bears the declaration: "Supporting your freedom to choose the name you use on social networks and other online services" (*My Name Is Me* 2011). Stories from parents, LGBTI people, sex workers, academics, activists, people with disabilities, abuse survivors, teachers, women, young people, whistleblowers, journalists, professionals, and others have collectively revealed that anonymity and pseudonymity are considered crucial to online life. The diversity of people contributing statements, and the conviction of their words, make *My Name Is Me* a compelling resource.

In 2015, *My Name Is Me* was taken down when the website hosting expired, but I have archived the site in full. In 2016, I approached all the people from *My Name Is Me* who had publicly available contact details, and asked questions about what they thought of pseudonyms, in order to follow up with the project five years later. The purpose of doing so was to offer those involved the opportunity to reflect on their statements, and consider whether things had changed in the intervening years. Wanting their responses to specifically address how they experienced online pseudonyms, and to reflect on their 2011 statement, I asked:

1. Do you think pseudonymity is important on social media? Why?
2. Have your views on, or experience of, pseudonymity changed since giving a statement to the *My Name Is Me* project in 2011?
3. Has it ever been a challenge remaining pseudonymous on social media? In what ways?



4. Can you comment on whether your online identity is faithful to your offline identity? Do you perceive them to be different in any important ways?

Further details of this process can be found in the ethics application for the survey, which is included in Appendix B. In addition to the platform walkthrough and *My Name Is Me*, I also collected policy announcements made by Google+, platform policy documents such as the name policy (Google 2013), news articles, and blog posts, to gain as many perspectives on the issue as I could. I collected news articles because news shapes public discourses (Koller & Wodak 2008) through the embedded social values in the production and reception of news (van Dijk 1988).

### **Platform walkthrough**

The walkthrough method begins by examining the platform's self-description:

Google+ is a place to connect with friends and family, and explore all of your interests. Share photos, send messages, and stay in touch with the people and topics you care about (Google+ 2015 n.p.).

Through this statement, people are already being oriented towards the Google+ platform as one that involves active participation via sharing photos and sending messages, and inputting information that makes sense to friends and family. The use of the phrase “*stay in touch*” confirms that this is a platform to communicate with people that one already knows. In order to unpack the language around how Google+ presents itself, I consulted the policy on page and profile names:

Google+ makes connecting with people on the web more like connecting with people in the real world. Because of this, it's important to use your common name so that the people you want to connect with can find you. Your common name is

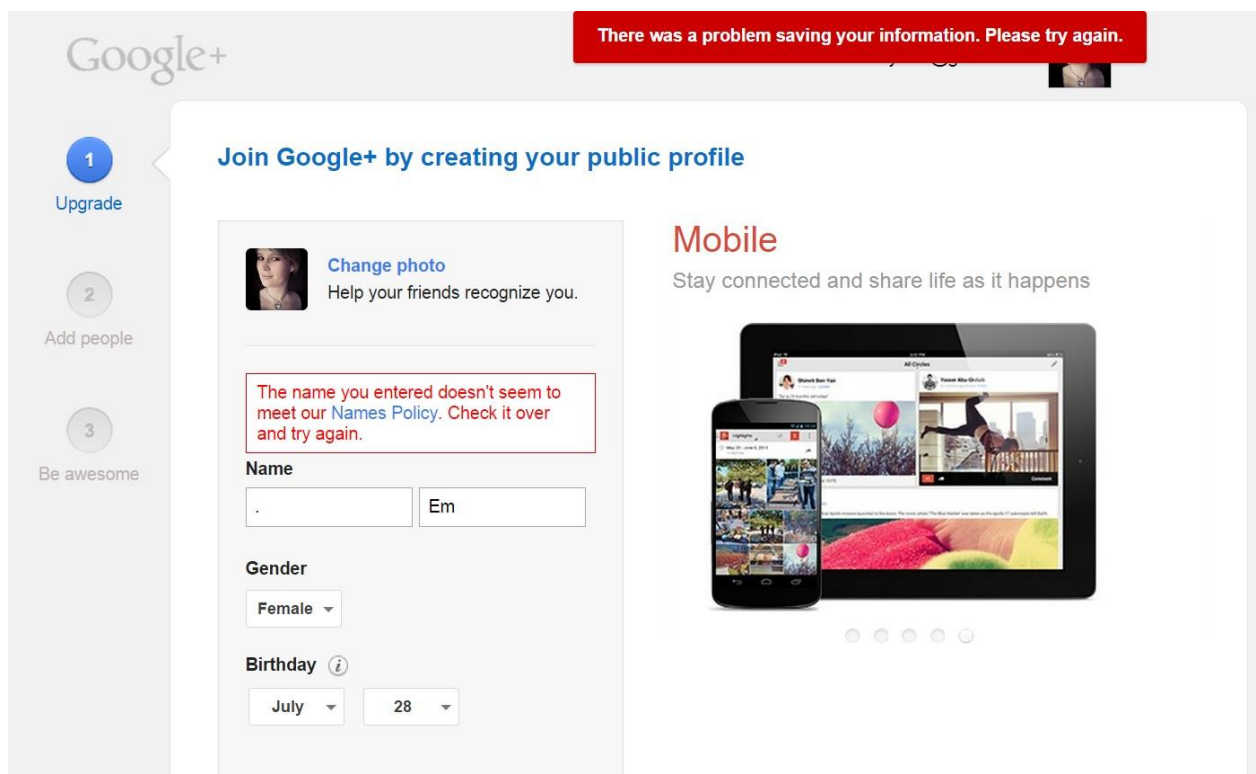
the name your friends, family or coworkers usually call you ... Personal profiles on Google+ are meant to represent you (Google+ 2013 n.p.).

This policy downplays the corporate nature of the site and uses an informal, friendly tone to hail the reader as a Google+ member who conforms to the site requirements. Using Google+ is for people with friends, family or co-workers, communicating the middle class, age-based expectation that they are employed adults with an active social life and a positive relationship with their family, as these are the people they are using Google+ to 'connect' with. The language of the policy also assumes a neat divide between online and offline communication: the real world is offline, separate from communication on the web, which downplays the importance of online communication, and online identities by extension. The idea that people have only one identity, expressed by the phrase, "personal profiles on Google+ are meant to represent you", shows Google's misunderstanding of the contextual dependence and multifaceted nature of identities – that, or wilful ignorance aimed at attracting only people for whom that is a truth.

Especially when coupled with Schmidt's statement (in Carvin 2011) mentioned earlier, that people should not use Google+ if they cannot use their real names, the language of the policy addresses those who are privileged enough to use their real names on social media, excluding those, like the people who made statements on *My Name Is Me*, who have valid reasons for not wanting to connect a social media network to their real name, or for whom collapsing the contexts of their domestic, social, and professional life would be problematic. Of course, few users read the terms and conditions of a website before signing up (Wauters, Lievens, & Valcke 2014), let alone abide by them faithfully: these terms and conditions are non-negotiable, one-sided, deliberately opaque contracts designed to protect corporations, not the people who use them. There are few protections for the people who use platforms like Facebook, even though users are the "lifeblood powering social media" (Hartzog, Melber, & Salinger 2013, n.p.). This policy is in place to exert power over the people using Google+, as people who agree to the terms and conditions are giving Google implicit permission to suspend their accounts if they do not conform to its rules.

Next, the walkthrough entailed following the signup process step by step, recording what kinds of information this platform asks people to submit. Signing up in August 2015, a login screen greeted me with the message: "Join Google+ by creating your public

profile”. The profile had pre-filled information, populated from my Gmail account: my full name, gender, birthdate, and profile photograph. Other Google services were advertised to me on the right side of the screen: Google Photos, Mobile, Circles, and Hangouts. Three steps to creating my profile were displayed on the left of the screen: “1. Upgrade [to the new Google+ profile], 2. Add people, 3. Be awesome”. I only had the option of changing this personal information, rather than filling it in myself. The photo of me was accompanied only by the options to “snap a photo” or “upload an image” to replace it; there was no option to remove the image. There were two boxes for my name, one for “first name” and one for “last name”. Filling in only one box prompted the message, “Please fill in the name fields”; putting a full stop in the first box prompted, “The name you entered doesn’t seem to meet our Names Policy. Check it over and try again”.



**Figure 1:** A screenshot from the 2015 walkthrough. I was unable to progress to the next step of the signup process with a full stop in the box for my first name.

The Help page gave a solution to only having one name: put a full stop in the surname box, because “our system expects you to have two names”. Platforms present people with preferred uses but, as discussed in the previous chapter, off-label or unintended uses

also exist (Albury 2017; Bercovici 2014; Duguay 2016). Part of the nymwars involved people putting initials, pseudonyms, or characters like full stops into these boxes in order to progress to the next screen. When I tried entering a full stop as my surname, it was clear that having one name was an unwanted option: a popup box appeared with the message, “your name may not result in the best experience on Google ... It’s recommended that you go by the name your friends, family, and colleagues know you by, because it will help you connect with people you know and help them find you”. To avoid this message, I entered my first and last name, and progressed to screens that asked me to “add people you know” and “follow things you love”. When I declined to follow any people or interests, a message came up before I was allowed to progress to the next screen: “You might be lonely – want to go back and add a few more?”

The penultimate screen asked for more information: where I live, where I went to school, and where I currently work. I didn’t fill in any of this information and, although I reached the screen showing “Welcome to Google+”, as if I was only now welcome after submitting the required amount of personal information, among the posts from recommended people and businesses was the message, “3 people you know live in Melbourne, Australia. Do you live there too?” In this way, Google+ continues to solicit a great deal of personal information, including persuading people through error messages, suggestions, and pop-ups to choose a name that fits within its predetermined format, despite having officially changed its policy to allow any kind of name on the site. The platform designer thus directs people towards completing the profile in the way most beneficial to the platform. This walkthrough reveals that Google is still interested in collecting as much personal data as possible – since it can no longer state this in its terms of use, due to the backlash, it has begun employing subtler means to persuade people to fill in details in its preferred manner.

Google+ has also asked others to play a role in enforcing the platform’s rules around names: in 2011, a Google+ employee asked people on the platform:

If you see a person with an obviously fake name, go to their profile and find the ‘Report Profile’ link in the bottom of the left column. Report it as a ‘Fake Profile’. We want Google+ to be a place for real people to connect with other real people (Bunner 2011, n.p.).

In this way, the platform draws on the flagging mechanism to recruit people in assisting with regulating content, in order to reduce labour costs, and to provide evidence of community assent for its decisions to remove or retain content (Crawford & Gillespie 2014).

To further investigate the changes that Google was making to the platform, and to emphasise how platforms are continually updated and modified, I carried out a second platform walkthrough 15 months later, in November 2016. After creating a new Google account, I progressed to the Join Google+ screen, which had already pre-filled my personal details, as in 2015. There were still two separate boxes for a name, with a slight shift in wording: instead of ‘first name’ and ‘last name’, I was now asked to provide my “given name” and “family name”. But there was one small yet important difference in the signup process: this time, I could opt to fill in only one field. When I deleted names from both boxes, the lettering reading “create profile” changed from live blue to inactive grey, indicating that I could no longer progress to the next screen of the menu. But entering just “Emily” in the “given name” box returned the “create profile” option to live blue lettering and a clickable box. Using just one name did come with a warning: Red lettering appeared above the name boxes, reading, “are you sure you entered your name correctly?” I chose to create my profile with just my first name, which took me to the following screen – but I knew this was not Google+’s preferred way for users to engage with the platform.

Secure | <https://accounts.google.com/SignUp?dsh=-8784959258866834379&service>

Google [Sign in](#)

## Create your Google Account

One account is all you need  
One free account gets you into everything Google.

G M YouTube Drive Photos Maps Chrome

Take it all with you  
Switch between devices, and pick up wherever you left off.

**Name**  
   
 Are you sure you entered your name correctly?

**Choose your username**  
 @gmail.com  
[I prefer to use my current email address](#)

**Create a password**

**Confirm your password**

**Birthday**  
 July 28 1988

**Gender**  
 Female

**Mobile phone**

**Your current email address**

**Location**  
 Australia

[Next step](#)

[Learn more about why we ask for this information.](#)

**Figure 2: A screenshot from the 2016 walkthrough. This time, I was able to continue signing up when I left blank the box for my last name.**

This brief platform walkthrough demonstrates to me that Google+ has reluctantly made these platform changes, and would prefer to still enforce the real-name policy that the nymwars so vociferously rejected. With my own firsthand experience in mind, I wanted to hear from other people who had used the platform. My survey responses contribute firsthand accounts from other people about their experiences with Google+, and attitudes towards pseudonymity, to my study.

**Survey responses: Reflecting on *My Name Is Me* five years later**

Of the 53 statements on *My Name Is Me*, 28 were from women, 20 from men, 2 from transgender people, 1 from a genderqueer person, and 2 did not nominate any gender in their posts. Twenty-five did not list any location; the 28 who did included Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, North Africa, Scandinavia, and the United Kingdom; 15 stated their location as the United States, including the states of Wisconsin, New York, Ohio, California, and Tennessee. I followed up with these people in 2015 with a survey on attitudes towards social media pseudonymity, which yielded seven replies from the 49 people who had publicly available contact information: Rugger Ducky, wiredferret, s.e. smith, AKM Adam (“AKMA”), islamoyankee, Talel Amira, and one anonymous participant. Although the response rate is low, those who did respond provided thoughtful comments on their own online naming practices, and the broader politics of social media names. In their responses to my survey, people often echoed the sentiments from their original statements made to *My Name Is Me* – one potential respondent declined to participate because they felt their views had not changed at all from 2011. I now summarise the comments from each of the seven participants in order to convey their varied reflections on social media pseudonymity.

**Rugger Ducky** claims pseudonyms are absolutely necessary as an option, online and in every other aspect of writing, because pseudonymity is a way of taking back power. Reflecting on the *My Name Is Me* project, Rugger Ducky says she has come to better appreciate subtle differences in pseudonyms: some people use them for personal protection; others for convenience. She reports that it has always been challenging to remain pseudonymous – not just for her, but for her wife too:

My online personality is very faithful to who I am. My friends and family in the rest of my life call me Ducky, and have for well over 2 decades. I don’t write anything I don’t firmly believe in. Don’t say things I would not say in person to someone either. I view my online name to be me. Nobody else. And for more than 15 years, this name means me online. It differentiates me from the literally tens of thousands of women around the world that share my birth name, first and last. This is me.

**wiredferret** uses the term ‘wallet names’, a subtle but important shift in language from the term ‘real name’, which does not assume offline or given names as being real. Wallet names, according to Geek Feminism Wiki (n.d.), are names that appear on government-issued identification documents. wiredferret lists six reasons for their pseudonym: to fit in and “not be a girl in a boys’ club”; to explore their sexuality without being outed to their family; to talk about post-partum depression; to avoid gendered harassment; to provide plausible deniability in employment situations; and to disassociate their activism from their employment name. For wiredferret, even though most pseudonymity can be breached, someone using a pseudonym is an indication that the person does not want to associate their wallet name with what they are saying. They explain this is especially important for marginalised groups, who can use pseudonymity to take on markers of more privileged groups as a kind of protection. Since wiredferret gave their statement to *My Name Is Me*, they have done a lot more research on pseudonymity, and concluded that “reputational integrity is vital to physical and economic safety”. They admit that remaining pseudonymous demands a “large cognitive tax”, which involves thinking about the audience of every post they make on social media, asking themselves, “Is this safe for my identity? My career? My relationship?” wiredferret has felt conflicted about presenting a deliberately upbeat online persona, alluding to the threatening presence of potential harassment as something that could occur at any time:

As a sex educator, I feel bad about not modeling healthy acceptance of my sexuality, but as a person who exists in the same world as GamerGate et al., I’m not going to ask for that to fall on my head. I know it will eventually – I’m feminist, outspoken, and talking about a lot of hot-button topics.

Looking back to their participation in *My Name Is Me*, wiredferret feels sad that “the needle has barely moved” in terms of attitudes towards pseudonymity.

**s.e. smith**’s belief that people should have the right to be pseudonymous for their safety has only deepened since giving their statement to *My Name Is Me*. They list various reasons for being pseudonymous: political activism; avoiding harassment; exercising free speech; avoiding corporate or government restrictions on social media behaviour; separating different identities; protecting family members; and reducing the risk of losing a job. Experimentation with social media identities is important to s.e. smith:



People may also want to explore social media pseudonymously and later make a decision to be open about their identities; it's easier to let a cat out of a bag than it is to stuff one back in.

Their own experience of pseudonymity has involved gradually moving away from it: "When my journalistic profile started to rise, I wanted to own my bylines, and thus transitioned into writing under my own name". This has not always been a smooth process: s.e. smith reports they have been doxed multiple times because of their controversial work. They believe platforms need to work more effectively to protect people by allowing pseudonymity, and by giving people the ability to remove identifying information from the internet.

**AKM Adam ("AKMA")** says his views on pseudonymity have not changed substantially since giving a statement to *My Name Is Me* in 2011: although there has been a proliferation of trolling and harassment, "it is not worth compromising the principle of pseudonymity just to out a few trolls". As a clergyman, AKMA is invested in having the same voice in private and in public: his role as clergyman involves practising a particular kind of integrity, according to him. Since 2011, he has become most concerned about increasing government and corporate surveillance, which he claims "betrays a fundamental disrespect for citizens and customers".

**islamoyankee/Hussein Rashid** thinks it is important to investigate the underlying impetus behind online harassment in order to stem the problem but, even with some anonymous hatred, "bad actors are not a reason to further limit people's freedoms". While he recognises that pseudonymity is essential for building online communities, his own pseudonym is simply "a nod to early technological culture", rather than an effort to compartmentalise different aspects of his identity.

**Talel Amira** has a more moderate attitude to pseudonymity five years after he contributed to *My Name Is Me*. In 2011, he claims, he could only see the positives of pseudonymity: "as a Tunisian who just got his freedom from dictatorship I was enjoying the fact that being protected by a pseudonym could be a choice, not an obligation". Now that he has seen people harassing others from the safety of their pseudonym, and the development of technology that could compromise pseudonymity, such as language analysis, his views have shifted, but he still thinks pseudonymity is worthwhile. Amira presents his online self selectively: "In real life I have good times and bad times. Online

I have only good times, and even if I post about my flops, I tend to do it in a sarcastic way with style”.

The **anonymous participant** says they identify more strongly with the pseudonym they use online than with their given name. Although maintaining boundaries between their professional online persona and pseudonym can be “awkward”, they say, “there are a lot of reasons why I avoid using my real name, including abusive past relationships and my professional role”.

Now that I have presented the 2015 survey results, I move to an analysis of my gathered data to argue that when people drew on the nymwars to discuss online pseudonymity, four main themes in support of pseudonymity emerged.

### **Results of the thematic analysis: Why pseudonyms matter**

My corpus of data is made up of original statements from *My Name Is Me* in 2011, the survey responses from 2015, academic articles, 16 news articles on the nymwars retrieved from news database Factiva, and a further 50 articles and blogs sourced from Google News. Overwhelmingly, journalists, bloggers, academics, and people posting on social media who discussed the nymwars agree that pseudonyms are valuable on social media. Scare quotes are often put around the term ‘real name’, most likely to draw attention to the difficulty present in calling a name ‘real’. Many people express that their pseudonym is the most real name they have, despite it not matching their legal or government-issued identification, such as a birth certificate, driver’s licence, or passport.

Performing a thematic analysis on these sources has led to four main, often overlapping, reasons for supporting pseudonyms, which all hinge on people having control over their own identities: 1) protecting vulnerable groups; 2) ensuring individual freedom and choice; 3) avoiding data collection by corporations; and 4) context management.

#### *Vulnerable groups*

Protecting vulnerable groups from harm is a compelling reason to allow pseudonyms online. boyd draws on Facebook’s history as a closed site for university students to argue

that its real-name policy is successful because it first created a value proposition that relies on real names, then opened up for general use. This is not necessarily the best trajectory for every platform, but it does explain why, in 2011, there was little pushback against Facebook's policy, while it was seen as inappropriate for Google+ to demand real names without first cultivating a culture of connecting with people who were already in someone's offline network. boyd (2012b, p. 31) argues that "the issue of whether or not to mandate 'real names' is fundamentally one of power and control". LM Stuart and MJ Dark (2014) claim that identity policies can function as either gateways or barriers to participation on social media. How someone is allowed to express their identity matters for the ensuing social relations of the site, as identity policies both emerge from, and perpetuate, existing social structures, where inequalities abound. For Andrew McNicol, people are complex beings who do not fit neatly into the categories that platforms provide:

None of us can be accurately transcribed into digital space and the more restrictions are imposed on our identity performance by these services, especially when they are mandatory and data validation rules are enforced, the more likely users will feel delegitimized or be left out entirely (McNicol 2013, p. 217).

Women and other vulnerable groups are particularly at risk of having their safety compromised when they are not in charge of their own identity online: "Real name policies only *appear* innocuous because of the assumption that the experiences of financially privileged English-speaking white men are universal" (Moll 2014, n.p.). None of the people who identified as men whom I surveyed report that they had any issues with remaining pseudonymous, but every woman or genderqueer participant expresses some difficulty with keeping their pseudonymous identity separate from their real name. One abuse survivor from *My Name Is Me* said in her 2011 statement: "Forcing me to use my legal name online ... forces me to choose between my safety and my voice" (Shei 2011). Vulnerable groups are considered to be best catered for when everyone on a social media site can choose their own name.

### *Freedom and choice*

Individual freedom and choice are at stake when people want to choose an identity they feel is authentic to them, whether they are transgender, queer, adopted, more associated with their stage persona than any other name, or have otherwise grown into a new identity. Molly Crabapple (2011) explains that she chose a different name at 19 to pursue nude modelling and, by the time she retired, “Molly was the name I was called by almost everyone, on and off-line, and I’ve kept it ever since”. For transgender performer Buck Angel (2011), his name is part of his identity as a public figure:

I feel the name Buck Angel is representative of my nature, and is well suited to my public persona. I believe it is part of what has helped to make me into the iconic figure I have become. It may not be the name I was born with, but it is the one that fits me and my work.

Mandating real names is claimed to be associated with repression and lack of freedom (Edwards 2013). As noted above, Talel Amira reports in the survey that he moved to America from the dictatorship in Tunisia, and associates pseudonymity with freedom. Even when people harass others pseudonymously, this is a price he is willing to pay: “We take it as a whole or leave it as a whole”.

### *Avoiding data collection*

Being mindful that social media companies collect and sell swathes of personal data is what motivates some people to seek pseudonymity to avoid data collection. A working paper claims pseudonyms were an accepted part of 1980s and 1990s internet culture that began changing when Facebook grew to prominence (Edwards 2013). Because social media companies profit from selling data to advertisers, anonymity and pseudonymity are seen as ways to avoid being profiled in this way. In the 2015 survey, wiredferret said they were sceptical of the way platforms approach names:

I suspect if any large media releases their grasp on using wallet names, it's because their profiling is perfected to the point that we have a single identifier in their systems and they don't have to care anymore.

Linking a Google+ account to an offline identity makes digital traces part of a searchable archive of everyday life and contributes to Google's advertising algorithms. Real-name policies are part of a broader conversation about identity, power, and information control, claims Moll (2014), who calls pseudonymity a technology of resistance. On *My Name Is Me*, Malte Spitz (2011) from the German Green Party made six months of his personal data, including telecommunications data, location, phone calls, tweets, and blog entries, available to the public in an interactive map, in an effort to illustrate just how much is collected about people. "I want an Internet where people can check what kind of data is stored about themselves", he says.

### *Context management*

Separating an identity into different facets that accurately or appropriately present someone in a particular situation – or context management – is brought up by Maymay (2011), an activist who argues his pseudonym gives him control over his identity. Technology journalist Quinn Norton also does not use her legal name online, as she believes, like Poole and van Dijck, that people are multifaceted:

We all have as many faces as we have people to face ... being the multitude isn't about lacking integrity, it's about flexibility, adaptability, and most of all, growing (Norton 2011 n.p.).

Two survey respondents explicitly state they avoid discussing their mental illness online with their real name: wiredferret only talks about their post-partum depression when pseudonymous, and s.e. smith says:

While I'm open about my identity and the fact that I am mentally ill, I still conceal my diagnosis online and don't discuss my day-to-day experience of mental illness. I prefer to maintain distance online for self-protection.

My article with Jordan Frith (2015) argues that the nymwars demonstrate that anonymity and pseudonymity are important avenues for productive identity play, self-exploration, and behaviour contextualisation online. The persistence of internet content can cause tension (Hogan 2013); pseudonyms are useful for people who wish to overcome this tension by containing their communication in appropriate settings. As discussed in Chapter 3, platforms that have real-name policies are part of the real-name web, which operates under the assumption that people have unique, personally identifying names they can use when signing up for social media accounts. In his case for the importance of pseudonyms, Hogan identifies two ways in which pseudonyms can be used to contextualise communication: situational motivations, or moving to another room in order to compartmentalise a life; and personal motivations, or putting on a costume for identity play. Paul Bernal (2014) takes the opposite approach when arguing against real-name policies: he says that using a pseudonym on Facebook or Google+ could actually be a way of *not* compartmentalising. If someone uses a persistent pseudonym, having their real name on one platform means the rest of their identity is left behind.

This thematic analysis demonstrates that most writing on the nymwars agrees that Google is overreaching by forcing people to use real names. Commentators including Scott Raymond (2011) claim it is hypocritical to allow celebrities and prominent Google employees to choose their own names, including Senior Vice-President of Social Business, Vic Gundotra, whose real first name is Vivek. Few articles argue that Google+'s real-name policy is fair. The journalist Jim Fenton (2011), for example, claims that as a private company, Google should be allowed to decide its own rules. As a corporate entity that exists to generate profit for its shareholders, Google aims to generate value in the form of information commodities (Andrejevic 2007). This is the motive for many platforms to design interfaces that capture detailed personal information, but it also means platforms are most interested in catering to those with the socioeconomic status most likely to have a disposable income, which suits advertisers as they can promote their products to potential customers.

Allowing only people who are able to use their real names on Google+ is Google's prerogative, but it is problematic for those who rely on Google's services for entertainment, communication, information, and work – having a Google+ account suspended could interfere with accessing other Google services. The restriction also seems to contradict the founders' mission, stated on its About page: “to organize the world's information and make it *universally accessible* and useful” (Google 2017; emphasis added). Although Google+ was the main target of the 2011 nymwars, it opened up conversations about identity, names, and pseudonymity on social media that have continued in different forms as real-name policies persist.

### **#MyNameIs: The nymwars resurface on Facebook**

As Google+ gradually let people with names in different formats sign up to the platform, Facebook's real-name policy came under increasing scrutiny. Facebook describes its rule that “Facebook users provide their real names and information” (Facebook 2013) as an ongoing ‘commitment’ people make to the platform. If someone's name changes, as in the case of marriage, they are obligated to update it on Facebook. The site even prompts people to update their profile photo and cover image periodically, sending a reminder to display a recent photo. In 2014, after it emerged that Facebook had been suspending the profiles of drag queens and transgendered people, the slogan ‘my name is’ was reclaimed to push for policy change (#MyNameIs 2015). Many of the same arguments that circulated during the nymwars resurfaced: that vulnerable people should be protected, because using real names is not safe for everyone (DoubleCakes 2014); and that pseudonym use is about context management, or “separating two sides of ourselves using the tools available to us” (Lingel & Gillespie 2014, n.p.).

Writing about queer communication technologies, Maggie MacAulay and Marcos Moldes (2016) argue that when Facebook changed the language in its policy from demanding ‘legal’ to ‘authentic’ names, this highlighted how queer identities are deemed ‘inauthentic’, as they challenge the hegemony of gender, destabilise identity as singular, and are framed as the cultural other. Oliver Haimson and Anna Lauren Hoffmann argue that Facebook positions itself as a kind of identity registrar with its real-name policy. They, too, draw on the complications that Facebook instigates for queer people: “Challenges surrounding identity, authenticity, and context online are perhaps most

sharply felt by those who express or carry certain marginalized or non-normative identities” (Haimson & Hoffmann 2016, n.p.). When real-name policies set up boundaries for marginalised groups instead of focusing on spam profiles, trolls, and harassers, they police and penalise the groups that rules about names are ostensibly designed to protect.

In 2015, Facebook introduced pseudonymous, discussion-based app Rooms, which lets people choose different usernames for each Room they use (Rooms 2015). Zuckerberg has reconsidered his views about real names, and this represents an attitude shift for Facebook:

We don't need to keep on only doing real identity things. If you're always under the pressure of real identity, I think that is somewhat of a burden. [Our view] is definitely, I think, a little bit more balanced now (Zuckerberg in Ingram 2014a, n.p.).

Despite this, Facebook's policy still insists that “Facebook is a community where people use their authentic identities” (Facebook 2015b). The nymwars are far from over.

## **Conclusion**

The nymwars have demonstrated that when people are denied agency in one way on a platform, they will attempt to reclaim it in other ways. Rather than either abandoning Google+ or conforming to its strict policies, people took to other social media platforms, as well as blogs and news websites, to argue their case. Some even posted their tirades against the policy on Google+ itself, a move that highlighted Google as an influential company that was failing to provide a social media site that caters to preferred identities. Commercial platforms have a vested interest in social media identities, because they translate to economic gain, while the people who use them are more likely to have goals that relate to building social capital or seeking information and entertainment. Attitudes to real-name policies are similar in academic work and



popular discourse: real-name policies are considered myopic, unfair, or more in the interests of the site than its members.

What is missing in the scholarship around the nymwars, and around anonymity and pseudonymity more broadly, is an account of the impact of the nymwars and related discourse on the social media environment. The benefit of studying this case over time is in seeing how the social media landscape has shifted; since 2011, the idea that pseudonymity is valuable has seen several new pseudonymous and anonymous sites and apps emerge, such as Whisper, Secret, and Yik Yak, although none have yet rivalled platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram in popularity. Perhaps it will prove more effective to resist real-name policies from within these dominant sites by continuing to push back against them, rather than expecting a contender to take their place.

Connecting the 2011 nymwars with the 2014 #MyNameIs campaign has allowed me to argue that platforms with real-name policies are still failing the people who use them, and focusing more on data collection and profits than creating a safe, meaningful social media experience. As MacAulay and Moldes (2016) put it, real-name policies prioritise market and state interests over those of individuals, as they render people transparent to markets and the state. In retaliation, people have refused to use Google+ and pushed back against real-name policies. I have also been the first to examine the nymwars using an affordance approach, which has allowed me to consider the real-name policy as an efficient data-gathering mechanism for the platform owners, and the backlash as an intervention which has had impact because it had a clear, consistent message.

Focusing on affordances has offered a way to understand how, and why, people have contested Google+'s restriction on names. Pseudonyms are a means for people to gain control over their identities and communication when engaging with social media, and platforms that do not afford pseudonymity are limiting this agency. To understand one specific instance of what people were fighting for in the nymwars, in the next chapter I turn to an investigation of pseudonym practices – what people do to remain pseudonymous – through a year-long observation of the subreddit Gonewild. I argue that in the strategic hiding and revealing of personal information including names and faces, pseudonymity is crucial to how those posting to Gonewild are able to communicate a playful, sexual self.

## CHAPTER 5

### Pseudonymity practices: Faceless bodies on Reddit Gonewild

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#### Introduction

Affordances are a key way to understand pseudonymity, but an affordance approach necessarily focuses on what a platform offers by critiquing the decisions made that result in certain options being offered or denied. In order to shift the focus from platform design and policy to what people *do* with the affordances they are given, this chapter moves to pseudonymity practices. For Joshua McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015), affordances are made sense of in and through practices.

I here examine the exhibitionist subreddit Gonewild, by drawing on a year's worth of observations and a survey of attitudes to Gonewild pseudonyms, to argue that the hiding of names and faces is crucial to the presentation of a playful, sexual self. For me, Reddit Gonewild represents a productive intersection of gender, ideology, and pseudonymity. Pseudonymity practices are the actions people take on social media to remain pseudonymous: clicking buttons, retweeting, posting photos or status updates or links. Even an action as straightforward as selecting the Like button on Facebook is laden with potential meaning: considering practices asks how people take action within the constraints of a platform's affordances. My practice approach begins with examining Reddit as a platform in detail, before focusing on how people carry out communicative acts on it. This chapter considers how people practise, or do, pseudonymity: how they playfully reveal and hide facets of their identities when taking and uploading sexualised self-portrait photographs. Reddit Gonewild demonstrates that there are places where pseudonymous expressions of sexuality flourish within a social media culture that privileges real names and discourages nudity – Facebook restricts images of genitals, buttocks, and female nipples, because “some audiences within our global community may be sensitive to this type of content” (Facebook 2015a, n.p.). I take Couldry's (2012)

approach to media-related practices to understand Gonewild as a platform that hosts ways of “showing and being shown” (Couldry 2012, p. 52), and that resides within a context of creating and consuming sexual images that people deliberately disconnect from other aspects of their identity on social media through pseudonymity.

This chapter understands pseudonymity practices as core to what Reddit is and how it works. Pseudonyms are the main form of identity expression on the site, and those contributing to Gonewild are explicitly encouraged to do so anonymously or pseudonymously. I draw from the literature on identity mapped out in the introduction chapter of this thesis to explore some of the tensions around visibility and identity information on the site, to argue that the kind of pseudonymity specific to Gonewild is the result of those who post to the site actively negotiating their identity within a particular social and political framework. I first examine Reddit as a pseudonymous platform, before employing content analysis to investigate the subreddit Gonewild, and a survey of people who post there. In this way, I can first examine how Reddit operates as a whole and how it has built its position in the social media landscape with a foundation of pseudonymity.

### **Reddit: The platform and its pseudonymous culture**

Reddit’s founders, college friends and entrepreneurs Alexis Ohanian and Steve Huffman, call the site a pseudonymous platform for online communities to share links and discussions. They articulate the importance of pseudonymity as a feature that means people can “be a little more human” (Ohanian 2014, n.p.). This section argues that pseudonymity is essential to how Reddit works, how it is imagined as a free, open platform, who uses it, and how it makes a profit. Reddit positions itself as a platform that stands in opposition to social media sites with real-name policies, like Facebook. Although Reddit is a privately owned platform with shareholders, valued at approximately USD\$500 million in 2014 (Cheredar 2014), it aims to appear democratic, egalitarian, and devoted to the people who use it. Gillespie (2017) acknowledges it is difficult for platforms to balance freedom of speech with community values, individual safety, aspirations of art, and wants of commerce, especially when they position themselves as neutral intermediaries of content that encourage open participation.

As a site that functions as a repository of links, Reddit calls itself the ‘front page of the internet’, and is variously referred to as social media, news sharing, news aggregation, user-generated, Web 2.0, and an entertainment website, with most news discourse around Reddit emphasising its collaborative, open aspects: the *Guardian* notes Reddit’s “decentralised structure, community moderation, and hands-off management” (Hern 2015, n.p.), and the *New York Times* calls it a site on which “users find, share and talk about web links and photos” (Isaac 2014 n.p.). This image has appeal within the founders’ own demographic: Ohanian and Huffman created Reddit as white male American college students in their early 20s, a group that remains its central audience (Duggan & Smith 2013). Much academic work on social media platforms (including van Dijck 2013b and Hogan 2013) considers that the ideology of the platform owners is one way to determine the culture of the site, which is why it is important to note that Reddit’s founders, particularly Ohanian, hold pseudonymity in high regard. Redditors can sign up to the site by only providing a username and password, or can browse without signing in at all. This is an influential decision – according to Adrienne Massanari (2015), the choice to create a pseudonymous social media site shapes interactions by allowing an unfiltered version of internet culture to flourish.

One of the most important ways in which Reddit records growth and popularity is from hits, which claim to measure the number of people accessing the site. A blog post from Reddit asserting it recorded 71.25 billion pageviews in 2014 (krispycrackers 2014) was reported on by other news outlets, which characterised the number as “staggering” (McCarthy 2015 n.p.) and the site as “gargantuan” (Schroeder 2015 n.p.), making Reddit’s quantification a valuable asset in its appeal to advertisers, since it is able to measure its reach. Numbers of hits and clicks are often used as measurements deployed to make the platform appear as popular as possible, although these figures do not measure how engaged someone is or how much they enjoy using the site. They must be taken as just one indicator of success, and not always a reliable one.

Knowing that sites boast about these numbers has sparked a global market for fake followers, hits, and likes, including Click Monkeys (2015), who offer 1000 ad clicks for US\$1. Doug Clark reports on a click farm in the Philippines that has its employees taking piles of SIM cards and manually creating false, yet mobile phone verified, social media accounts: “Just as fast as Silicon Valley conjures something valuable from digital ephemera, click farms seek ways to create counterfeits” (Clark 2015, n.p.). Numbers alone are never enough to tell the whole story about a site’s popularity and influence.

As well as statistics about hits and clicks, Reddit's cultural importance can be suggested by the calibre of the public figures who conduct question-and-answer sessions on Reddit's Ask Me Anything subreddit, including US President Barack Obama in 2012, or by mapping the spread of content from Reddit through the internet. Posts from BuzzFeed often draw on Reddit comment threads, by illustrating responses to a question posed on AskReddit with stock photography, because "Reddit's trends are often indicative of internet behavior as a whole" (Warzel 2013, n.p.). Journalist Mike Isaac (2014) argues that BuzzFeed's repackaging of Reddit's content means it is monetising content better than Reddit itself.

Considering how the platform was created and is owned also gives a sense of Reddit's values. As it has grown from a link repository in 2005, to a site with 36,136,190 accounts and 190,227,552 posts ten years later (Reddit admins 2015a), and as the 27th top site on the web (Alexa 2016), it has had to balance profitability with the interests of the people on the site. Through all this, Reddit is still a pseudonymous platform, a decision that benefits both Redditors and owners. Since US\$50 million venture capital funding in September 2014 (Ingram 2014b), Reddit must maintain the balance between profiting and appealing to its members more carefully than ever. Its owners describe their role as "something between party hosts and janitors" (Ohanian 2012, n.p.), as they see their duties as making sure everyone enjoys Reddit, and that there are no troublemakers or problems. The metaphor is one that communicates the goals of Reddit as a site for entertainment and socialisation, but it is also a reminder that the platform is a private space: "Reddit is not a utility or a public square", argues John Scalzi (2012, n.p.).

Fighting for anonymity and pseudonymity is an important part of Reddit's commitment to an open internet. Ohanian sees anonymity as part of a tradition of letting ideas flourish. He claims that anonymity and pseudonymity have always had, and always will have, a place in communication platforms (Schmelzer 2014), and this is expressed not only through Reddit's pseudonymous interface, but in his investment in anonymous app Secret (Ingram 2014b), which has been discussed in Chapter 3 as a popular app that was shut down in April 2015 because, according to one commentator, "anonymity online turns people into total assholes" (Lapowsky 2015, n.p.). In Secret's prime, Ohanian argues in a blog post that the desire to eliminate anonymity is dangerous, "because of the disenfranchised voices it would squelch" (Ohanian 2014, n.p.). Anonymity, he explains, allows people to be "truly honest, creative, and open" (Ohanian, 2014 n.p.). To mention Ohanian's views on anonymity and pseudonymity is not to suggest that Reddit

is simply a vehicle for his ideas about the world – but that Reddit was created by two people with specific values around identity. Valuing anonymity as one of the central principles of the site was formalised in early 2015, when a blog post articulated Reddit’s seven principles. Third on the list is “respect anonymity and privacy” (Reddit admins 2015b n.p.). These values and rules are important because they manifest in the platform’s design, affordances, and eventually its use and culture.

*Platform governance: Policies, rules, Reddiquette, guidelines, and moderation*

Rules that platforms make about identity are crucial to its use. Identity policies, such as real-name policies, which have been explored in the previous chapter on the nymwars, both emerge from, and perpetuate, wider social structures: they can be either a gateway or a barrier to participation (Stuart & Dark 2014). End-user licence agreements (EULAs) impose cultural norms, restraints, and obligations. Reddit’s rules come in four separate layers. First, the privacy policy and user agreement outline the legal obligations of Redditors, and further the platform’s commitment to appearing open and transparent by stating it keeps a record of all policy changes on the site as they are updated. These policies do not explicitly direct people towards having a pseudonym, or give instructions about which names to use – they simply state that people are required to provide a username and password, and have their IP address logged (Reddit 2015a).

The second layer of Reddit governance is the Rules of Reddit, which as of mid-2015 have been called the content policy. This prohibits Redditors from spamming, manipulating the voting system, posting personal information, posting child pornography, and “breaking the site” (by interrupting the servers, introducing malicious code, creating programs that violate any rules, or assisting other people in misusing the site). This layer of governance is where names are explained – Redditors are not allowed to mention “the full name, employer, or other real-life details of another Redditor” (Reddit 2015c, n.p.). This rule is expanded on in the third layer of governance: Reddiquette, the informal rules of the site, which are apparently “written by redditors themselves” (Reddit 2015b, n.p.), a strategic endeavour to put the onus on users to police behaviour on the site, as Massanari (2015) suggests. Reddiquette, a portmanteau of ‘Reddit’ and ‘etiquette’, can be summed up with the first rule: “remember the human” (Reddit 2015b,

n.p.), a caution against cruelty, and a reminder that, just because something is online, it is not any less ‘real’:

When you communicate online, all you see is a computer screen. When talking to someone you might want to ask yourself ‘Would I say it to the person’s face?’ ... Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life (Reddit 2015b, n.p.).

Reddiquette explains the rule about not posting the personal information of others, claiming that “witch hunts and vigilantism hurt innocent people too often” (Reddit 2015b, n.p.), a theme that will be taken up in the next chapter, ‘Pseudonymity disrupted: Making forced connections through doxing’. Although Reddit’s interface permits any kind of username, it is stated explicitly in these rules that Reddit is not for real names. The fourth layer of regulation on Reddit is the subreddit guidelines, available on the sidebar of each subreddit. These include rules about what kinds of content are expected, along with what formats of content are acceptable, in order to keep subreddits hosting relevant, specific content.

These four layers of governance on Reddit are largely enforced by teams of unpaid volunteer moderators, who contribute countless hours of free labour to the site by creating and enforcing subreddit rules. The moderation process also ensures that Reddit as a company can distance itself from taking responsibility for misdemeanours on the site: as one staff member claims, Reddit is “an engine for creating communities” (chromakode 2011, n.p.), which is worded to appear as though Reddit is not responsible for the content that appears on the platform. Having volunteer moderators appraise content to ensure it follows the rules is one of many moderation possibilities: other platforms do not publish comments until they have been approved by a moderator, or rely on people to flag offensive content, or in Instagram’s case, allow individuals to set up lists of words or phrases they find offensive, which hides comments with those words from their posts (Systrom 2016). As Gillespie (2017) argues, platforms sometimes struggle with developing moderation systems that protect the people on the site and embody a spirit of platform governance that captures the values of the owners, staff, and people using the site. On Reddit, moderators occupy a territory somewhere in between a

staff member and a user of the site; on Gonewild, most of the moderators submit photos as well as deciding which photos are inappropriate for the subreddit.

The rules of Reddit are constantly in flux; they change as the site grows and develops. For example, Gonewild itself occupies a contentious position on Reddit, as it was actually against the very rules of the site when it was formed – Gonewild was established in 2009, but until 2012 the user agreement banned any sexually suggestive material or even language (Reddit 2012). This was revised in 2013 to ban only sexually suggestive content involving minors (Reddit 2013). Within the site, there are conflicts around general monetising of the content and the subreddit-specific rules. Gonewild's guidelines state that it wishes "to remain separated from all money-making endeavors" so that "people post for absolutely no other reason than the thrill of it" (xs51 2014, n.p.), but individual posts bear gold stars to indicate which have been 'gilded', or awarded premium subscription package Reddit Gold. In addition to gilded posts, an algorithm dedicated to featuring only gilded posts has been featured since October 2013. In this way, the open and free ideology behind Reddit looks like a way for Reddit to appear invested in an open internet by letting redditors set up their own subreddits, then leveraging the resulting groups by using them as a target demographic. But Reddit's success, with an audience that doubles each year (Fiegerman 2014), has come about because it has carefully balanced fostering subreddits, redditors, and content, while gradually building its business plans from advertising into subscription programs and branded sites, by creating a site for anonymous people to come together over the things that interest them most.

Social media always exists in an ecology: Nick Douglas (2014) argues that platforms are never truly independent, as they always share content and people. Reddit has spilled out into the rest of the internet by being featured on lists of 'share this post' buttons, which, as I have canvassed in Chapter 3, Web 2.0 and the real name web, forms a Like economy which tightly links data from across the web to social media profiles (Gerlitz & Helmond 2013). For example, the online newspaper *The Guardian* features share buttons at the bottom of each article, prompting readers to post a link to the article to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, or Google+, or send a link in an email. This is just one feature of a dynamic social media environment where most people are on multiple sites, for multiple reasons. Such pluralism can be seen within Reddit itself, which is made up of specific subreddits that have their own rules, members, content,



and culture. Throwaway accounts and verification are two strategies to negotiate these rules.

### *Throwaways*

While the convention on Reddit is to adhere to one username that acts as a repository for posts, comments, votes, and karma points, Redditors employ creative strategies to either remain as anonymous as possible, or develop a reputation on the site. The creation of a ‘throwaway’, temporary Reddit account strips away someone’s history, and often the throwaway username will avoid referencing a real name, gender, or place. Reddit does not demand legal names or even email addresses; it is possible to sign up for the site with only a username and password. Since Reddit is geared towards connecting based on interests rather than pre-existing relationships, Redditors have the option to contact each other by sending direct messages, but the most common form of interaction is voting or commenting on posts. Temporary or throwaway accounts allow people to disclose particular information without the repercussions of it being linked with their persistent identity (Leavitt 2015). Being able to dissociate from persistent and identifiable identities is important to many people online. The convention on Reddit is to have one pseudonym that records and displays a history of what someone has posted, voted on, or commented around the site. Throwaways disrupt the idea that each person has one account, although there are a large number of people who browse Reddit without registering an account at all.

### *Verification*

The second strategy that Redditors use to gain control over their accounts is verification: the process of attaching certain credentials to a username. This process does not, however, always involve Redditors revealing their real names. Guaranteeing the identity of any social media account is usually done through a process of verification, which results in a symbol or badge to identify the account. The motivation may be consistent, but the processes involved, and evidence accepted, vary. On Facebook,

Twitter, and Instagram, verified accounts are usually those of celebrities or public figures like politicians. Until July 2016, Twitter did not allow people to request a verified account; Twitter employees would monitor high-profile accounts and ask them to provide additional details so they could confer a verified symbol on them. But this changed to allow people to apply for verification anytime, as long as the account is of public interest (Bhatnagar 2016). This move realigns Twitter towards real names rather than pseudonymous accounts: Twitter allows any handle and screen name, but to verify an account real names, phone numbers, email addresses, and photos must be included. When verified, a blue badge with a tick symbol is added to a username. The specific term ‘authenticity’ is mentioned by all three of these platforms when they justify their verification process: “keeping Instagram authentic is critical – it’s a place where real people share real moments”, claims the company blog (Instagram 2012, n.p.).

What makes the verification process on Reddit unique is that it entails two separate things: either an account has a verified email address, which means the person has opted in to connecting an email address with their Reddit account; or their account is not verified and they are guaranteeing their identity to a specific subreddit. Verification is most commonly associated with celebrities proving it is actually them hosting a question-and-answer session on subreddit Ask Me Anything, which often references the veracity of other social media sites having verified accounts. Another layer of complexity exists for Reddit Gonewild verifications, which only connect a person with their username, not their legal name. As a way of letting the audience know that the person in the photo has taken the photograph consensually and intentionally to show off in that particular context, a verification process has become an important part of the site. Being verified involves a Redditor posting an image of their own body that includes a handwritten sign with their Reddit username, the name of the subreddit, and the date. Moderators manually approve these posts, and award verified Redditors ‘flair’ in the form of a Reddit alien icon that appears next to their username.

While Redditors who post to Gonewild are expected to be the same people as in the images, they are not expected to reveal their real names. Verification adds to Gonewild’s image, and people’s expectations, of being an amateur, consensual space for pseudonymous nude photos, which is emphasised with the claim on the homepage that “consent is a critical part of the overall health of this community” (xs51 2014). Having underscored the importance of pseudonymity to Reddit’s culture, the next section

addresses social media practices as a way of understanding the pseudonymity practices that are examined in this chapter on Reddit Gonewild.

### **Social media practices**

What people *do* when they engage with media has been a focus for all kinds of scholars who encounter media as objects of study. Social media actions, activities, behaviours, habits, and strategies – whether they involve creating and posting, reacting and commenting, or browsing and listening – are most often referred to as *practices*. Although a whole realm of work exists on social practice theory,<sup>9</sup> it is Couldry's understanding of media as practice that I wish to focus on here. In his article 'Theorising media as practice' (Couldry 2004), he introduces a paradigm of media research which sees media as practice, rather than a set of texts or a production economy. He asks, "what, quite simply, are people *doing* in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?" (Couldry 2004, p. 119). For Couldry (2012), practice theory replaces an older notion of culture as a set of internal ideologies with publicly observable processes: practices, especially routines rather than conscious actions; and discourses, a system of meanings which allow people to speak.

As I have detailed in the previous chapter on affordances, there is a big difference between the basic possibilities for technology and how it actually comes to be used. Couldry lays out four varieties of media-related practice: searching and search-enabling, which includes exchanging the found information; showing, including posting videos to YouTube or photos to Facebook, and the way Facebook automatically makes social networks and connections to friends visible; presencing, or sustaining a public presence with media; and archiving, or managing the digital traces someone leaves behind. My research into Gonewild mostly emphasises the 'showing' aspect that Couldry nominates, because I am investigating how people post and view pictures. Couldry (2012) argues that some contexts for showing are happy, like posting photos to Facebook after a party. Others may have an aggressive motive, like humiliating someone, or a defensive motive, like pensioners filming local drug deals to report to the police. Gonewild is a context of sexual, intimate showing. Although Gonewild posts are also a kind of presencing,

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<sup>9</sup> For more scholarship on practice theory, see Reckwitz 2002; Schatzki 1996; Shove, Watson, & Pantzar 2012; and von Savigny, Korr-Cetina, & Schatzki 2001.

because they involve some aspects of identity being presented publicly, the way the subreddit is organised means attention is directed to individual pieces of content, rather than particular people's Reddit accounts.

In the thesis introduction, I asserted I would be investigating the identity work involved in social media pseudonymity. Identity work is a media practice: as Couldry puts it, “we need the perspective of practice to help us address how media are embedded in the interlocking fabric of social and cultural life” (Couldry 2004, p. 129). It is through everyday media practices – as distinguished from what Couldry (2012) considers to be exceptional media practices, such as political protests – that media's relations to society can be understood. As a social media platform that depends on content created and linked to by its members, Reddit is ripe for a practice approach. McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) argue that vernacular affordances, or how people make sense of the relationship between the platform and what they can do with it, are a productive way to account for how the materiality of technologies invite and constrain certain practices while also accommodating emergent and unexpected uses. One way of paying attention to the platform specificities of Reddit as it shapes, and is shaped by, practices is to focus on the platform vernacular, which looks to the established social conventions of a platform to determine which kinds of practices are considered legible and legitimate:

Each social media platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics, which can be considered as constituting a ‘platform vernacular’, or a popular (as in ‘of the people’) genre of communication (Gibbs et al. 2014, p. 257).

Certain practices become expected and established vernaculars, which are in turn enforced by others: when I wrote about platform regulation with Jenny Kennedy and James Meese, we emphasised that everyday practices are crucial to how platforms are governed (Kennedy, Meese, & van der Nagel 2016), with the understanding that social media practices are ways in which individuals negotiate attempts by platforms to encourage particular kinds of content. Robert Glenn Howard (2008) claims that the vernacular is a communication performance that hybridises the institutional and non-institutional, meaning that no discourse can be romanticised as pure; likewise, Burgess

(2006) uses ‘vernacular creativity’ to describe creative practices that are influenced by commercial popular culture, but emerge from non-elite social contexts.

As will be seen from my analysis of Reddit Gonewild posts, I study the practices on Gonewild that form a platform vernacular in which play with pseudonymity and identity is at the forefront.

## **Reddit Gonewild**

The name of the subreddit Gonewild is derived from the American softcore pornography franchise *Girls Gone Wild*, created in 1997 as a video series depicting young women in party locations incited by film crews to expose their naked bodies to the camera. *Girls Gone Wild* focuses on women releasing their sexual inhibitions (Esch & Mayer 2007), with the authenticity of the young women a major selling point for the franchise – the phrase ‘gone wild’ suggests that the women are transgressing boundaries to perform a risqué, sexual self within the boundless language of ‘pornotopia’: “a fantasyland of freely flowing desire, abundance of sexual acts and bodily displays” (Marcus in Paasonen 2007, p. 50). Gonewild describes itself as an “amateur exhibitionist community” (xs51 2014 n.p.). Breasts, buttocks, legs, and genitals dominate the homepage, while the identity marker of the face is rarely revealed. Gonewild is at the centre of many other amateur pornography-themed subreddits. It has the largest number of subscribers – just over one million by the beginning of 2017 – and is ranked first out of any Not Safe For Work (NSFW) subreddit in terms of both subscribers and activity (RedditList 2015). But a better indicator of its importance to the site is that many other subreddits are based on Gonewild, emphasising different characteristics of those posting, such as *Gonewildcurvy*, *Gonewildcolor*, and *AsiansGoneWild*. These other avenues for sexual visibility play off against the Gonewild subreddit, which functions as not just the original, but as the space where particular kinds of bodies – female, white, young, and slender – are the most welcome.

At the top of Gonewild’s homepage stretches a pink animal-print banner, which displays the avatar, the Reddit logo, and the phrase, “Welcome to gonewild!” The largest text on the homepage is on the right-hand side, in a green box marked, “Submit a new link”, encouraging submissions. The photographs appear as provocatively titled links to externally hosted images; the titles include a bracketed letter to denote the gender of the

photograph's subject. The titles, "[f]irst timer, looking for someone to think I'm sexy", "just having [f]un", "[f]or science, this is what 30G boobies look like" all indicate that the subject of the photograph identifies as female. Every subreddit has specific guidelines about what and how to post, and Gonewild's guidelines encourage Redditors to post anonymously, although, as I have been arguing, the suggestions are much closer to recommending pseudonymity practices: using a temporary or 'throwaway' account, taking photos against a plain background, and blurring out tattoos or birthmarks. Moderator xs51 implores:

'Anonymize' yourself ... Make sure the username is completely original and not something that could be tied back to you ... Don't have ANYTHING that someone could google ... don't include your face in your pictures ... You will get requests for personal information. Don't give it out, ever (xs51 2014 n.p.).

In posting naked photos to Gonewild, the assumption is that these photos would not be posted to other social media sites that use real names, framing Gonewild as an alternative. A moderator reinforces this divide by asserting that "if it's safe for Facebook, it's too mild for Gonewild" (xs51 2014 n.p.). In the same Frequently Asked Questions section, those who post are asked to separate this identity from named social media accounts. Moderator xs51 describes the photos as "an alternate 'risky-business-only' account", belonging to the Redditor's "alter ego" (xs51 2014 n.p.). This choice of words reinforces the idea that those posting on Gonewild are people who must hide their identity as they should not ordinarily be found naked on the internet, which is appealing, as one Redditor who browses the photos explains:

The real eroticism is that these are actual, genuine people, who are deciding, for their own thrill, to secretly expose themselves in a way that is impossible and taboo in daily casual life ... it's a carved out window into a specific person's actual secret life.

Calling the posts “secret”, “taboo”, and a “window” into someone’s life suggests that using a pseudonym while posting naked photographs on the internet is seen as a way to remain safe. This implies there is risk in public nudity, namely the reputation damage of being associated with images considered intimate or explicit, which transgresses the norm that these images should be kept private, as well as the potential for the naked person to be harassed, abused, or stalked. But having guidelines and social norms as cultural codes does not mean that everyone adheres to these. There are many Gonewild posts of people who do show their faces, as well as other identifying information like tattoos, clothing, and bedroom interiors. These posters may intend for others to recognise them from their photos, or the additional exposure of including their faces may appeal to them.

## **Methods and ethics**

To analyse pseudonyms on Reddit Gonewild, I began by visiting the AskReddit subreddit, and searching for threads about Gonewild, in order to gain a sense of Reddit’s attitudes towards the subreddit. I recorded the top 100 AskReddit posts about Gonewild, sorted by ‘most relevant’. This insight then helped me form the main part of the study, which has involved two approaches: conducting a year-long observation of the subreddit, and reaching out to people who posted to Gonewild to ask about their views on, and experience of, social media pseudonymity in this setting.

When I began studying Reddit Gonewild, I was struck by the sameness of the posts that made it to the front page. In order to find out whether the types of images changed over time, I conducted a systematic year-long observation of Gonewild, which ran from 8 August 2013 to 8 August 2014. To organise this data, I recorded the pseudonyms and image titles, and took screenshots of the six main algorithms on Gonewild each day: ‘hot’ is the default homepage, ‘new’ displays content in order of submission time; ‘rising’ is for posts that are getting more upvotes than downvotes; ‘controversial’ posts have a similar number of upvotes and downvotes; ‘top’ further sorts the content by featuring the most popular posts from the current hour, day, week, month, year, or from all time; ‘gilded’ posts have been awarded Reddit Gold; ‘wiki’ functions as an information page about the rules of the subreddit; and ‘promoted’ features advertising material from other websites, targeted to the demographics of that subreddit. I was particularly interested in the

kinds of images that became the most upvoted, because they became the default images that greeted people visiting the subreddit. To build a collection of the ‘hottest’ images (the ones that appeared at the top of the ‘hot’ algorithm), I recorded the top ten posts to the site each day, including the title, main image, number of upvotes, and comments. This method only captured the main image associated with each post – on Gonewild, links are usually to single images, but occasionally whole albums are linked.

After collecting Gonewild data for a year, I used content analysis to sort the images into categories. I manually coded each image, noting the date and its algorithm, then recorded details about the subject of the image: gender, which was signified by letters in square brackets ([m] for male, [f] for female, [mf] for both genders, [cd] for cross-dresser, [t] for transsexual, or [?] for a surprise), whether the poster’s face was in the image or not (face, partial face, or no face), how clothed they were (nude, underwear, partially clothed, or fully clothed), the main body part featured in the photo (breasts, buttocks, vagina, penis, chest, stomach, legs, face, or full body, which often included a number of other body parts), and whether the image was part of a banner.

Together with the results of the subreddit observation, and the insights from the AskReddit threads, I asked people who posted to Gonewild the following questions – they are similar to the ones I asked the *My Name Is Me* participants in Chapter 4, because this thesis is interested in firsthand accounts of people who are pseudonymous on social media.

1. Do you think pseudonymity is important on social media? Why?
2. Do you use your real name on Reddit? Why? If you use a pseudonym or handle when you post, how do you know this will remain separate from your real name?
3. Has it ever been a challenge remaining pseudonymous on social media? In what ways?
4. Can you comment on whether your online identity is faithful to your offline identity? Do you perceive them to be different in any important ways?
5. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experience of, or views on, social media pseudonymity?



I sent 250 Redditors who had recently posted to Gonewild a private message on Reddit with a link to a survey which presented them with these questions, and asked them to provide demographic details about themselves if they were comfortable, including their age, gender, occupation, city and country of residence, education level, and other social media platforms they use.

I have discussed in the thesis introduction how to ethically approach online texts, and that I have aimed to strike a balance between giving credit to those who write publicly, and giving privacy to those who are communicating quietly. For social media researchers, the balance between public and private texts is difficult to navigate. Krippendorff (2013) argues that assigning pseudonyms to individual voices may not be enough to protect their identity, as search engines can find the source of the quote, but Mike Thelwall, David Wilkinson, and Sukhvinder Uppal (2010, p. 193) argue that being able to be found through search engines is the very criterion that makes texts permissible to study, because this indicates the text is in the public domain and its use is not an invasion of privacy. As yet, there is no consensus around how best to treat Reddit posts – as it is a publicly available social media site that some Redditors treat as a private conversation, it is difficult to know where the boundaries are for republishing content. Of the limited research done on Reddit, a variety of approaches have been taken, which I now summarise in order to highlight the issues at stake when ethically researching social media.

Annika Richterich (2014), in her analysis of ‘karmawhoring’ on Reddit, uses a screenshot of a Redditor’s trophy cabinet as part of their profile, and quotes Reddit comments, attributing them to ‘source’ afterwards, which does not include the Reddit username but does link to the original post, which contains usernames and all the secondary information that comes with them. In her book on participatory culture and Reddit, Massanari (2015) conducted interviews as well as observing the platform in a manner inspired by other ethnographies. She attributes quotes to the username from which they were posted, whether the quotes contain sensitive information or not, and it is unclear whether she asked permission for this. Idibon, a language-processing company that performs sentiment analysis on large sets of social media data, measured the levels of toxicity and supportiveness in various subreddits by coding comments as ‘supportive’, ‘neutral’, or ‘toxic’, finding that misogynist group The Red Pill was the most

toxic subreddit (Bell 2015). *Guardian* journalist Alex Hern has reported on Bell's work, as well as performing his own data analysis of Reddit in collaboration with journalist Helena Bengtsson (2015), to draw links between subreddits in order to classify them into 'good' (Advice Animals, Aww, DIY) and 'bad' (Drunk Girls, Celebrity Pussy, Gentleman boners, Watch People Die). The idea that subreddits can be unequivocally 'good' or 'bad' is reductive, and unhelpful in getting a sense of specific subreddits and the overall culture of such a diverse social media site.

I acknowledge that in gathering and interpreting data sourced from Gonewild, I have made decisions that will have affected the results. For example, in choosing which body parts to code for, I have gendered them. I could have included a 'genitals' category and a 'chest' category that did not specify gender, unlike 'vagina', 'penis', and 'breasts', which do. But I feel that the gender of those posting is relevant to my results. I have also made decisions about data collection for reasons of practicality and manageable data strategies – taking screenshots and copy-pasting the images and image titles – although this process has been affected by a number of factors, from what time I was able to log on, as the top posts are always changing by the number of upvotes they receive, to whether a banner was featured, as banners take up space on the homepage, crowding out other posts. In addition, the AskReddit threads about Gonewild are limited to those who voluntarily contribute their comments, which is both a limitation and an advantage: the comments may not accurately reflect the views of Reddit's wider demographics, but the questions and answers have come spontaneously from Redditors, not directed by my asking questions in my skewed frame as a researcher.

On Reddit Gonewild, despite the plea that people "anonymize" (xs51 2014 n.p.) themselves when posting, the images still reveal identity clues about those who post them. This section asks how Redditors who post to Gonewild negotiate the platform, and make decisions about the content they create and post, in the context of showing off their bodies. While posting pictures is the most visible form of practice on Gonewild, another practice that is just as important is the moderation of the subreddit, which means that direct transgressions, such as posting a real name, will lead to the post being removed.

On Gonewild, pseudonymity plays against the way some posters would be clearly identifiable to those who already know them. Many of the photos reveal details about a person that, while they remain unlinked with a person's identifying features, contain all

kinds of personal information: my collected data includes images with interiors, furniture, bedspreads, books, jewellery, clothing, sports uniforms, work uniforms, Halloween costumes, tattoos, sex toys, handwriting, photos, posters, and phone covers reflected in mirrors. These identity clues complicate the notion that it is simple to contextualise these posts so they remain only on Gonewild. Certain personal information is revealed as soon as someone posts to the site: any post on Gonewild will immediately communicate that this person is a Redditor who speaks English. If photos include elements such as badges, uniforms, or interiors that suggest particular locations, the person posting is potentially more identifiable.

This is not to suggest that the people in the images haven't considered this – indeed, some posters are deliberately identifying themselves to some people but not others, as the title “(f)or my professor who said he reddits, from your favorite student :)” might indicate. The crucial aspect of being able to use pseudonyms is the contextualisation of these posts: for example, the aforementioned professor might know who the subject of the image is, but another person in her class would not. Without a name or a face, these images cannot immediately be connected to a publicly facing self, and this gives rise to play and suggestion. After investigating the way Gonewild is discussed on AskReddit posts, I have used content analysis to explore the diverse, nuanced practices of pseudonymity on the site.

### **AskReddit posts about Gonewild**

From the top 100 posts in AskReddit about Gonewild, I have found that a few of the posts focused on the mechanics of Gonewild itself, asking how the subreddit works – why there are not separate subreddits for men and women, for example, or why there is an age limit – which indicates some confusion over how the subreddit is run and the parameters of participation. However, the majority of the posts concern how posting to Gonewild can leak into other contexts in which sexual content is appreciated differently. The most common questions concerned motivations for posting: “Girls of r/gonewild, what makes you post there?”; consequences after posting: “Have you ever posted to r/gonewild and lived to regret your decision?”; and finding that someone familiar has been posting or browsing, usually a partner: “Reddit, I was surfing /gonewild, and I just recognized my fiancée! I had no idea she was posting naked pictures of herself. What

should I do?” The topics of these threads illustrate that Gonewild is always considered part of the broader site, not something that ever stands alone from Reddit, or only exists online.

Responses to AskReddit threads have helped me to understand some of the attitudes around Gonewild, and shaped my survey questions. I discounted questions that moralised about the posting of naked or sexualised photos, such as whether posting to Gonewild makes someone a slut, or whether it counts as cheating if partnered people submit their photos. The question of why people choose to post has been answered many times, with most responses simply stating that posting is sexy and fun. Common responses to the AskReddit question, “why do you post to Gonewild?” include:

I think its a thrill. I am very prude in real life so GW is like a release valve =)

I'm an exhibitionist. I like the thrill of people seeing me naked.

it's a complete confidence booster ... it's kind of a turn on knowing that heaps of people appreciate your body the way it is and that they're fapping [masturbating] to you

Knowing that I'm turning some one on makes me wet

‘Why do you eat chocolate?’ Because I like chocolate.

Someone who browses the photos explains their motives for doing so:

The thought of the boobies and behinds belonging to normal people really does it for me. Porn stars don't really tickle my fancy (anymore). And they're not random amateurs on the net, they're redditors who share my interests, sense of humor, etc. ... there's a sort of intimacy that's arousing.

This Redditor has made a distinction between “porn stars” and the “normal people” who post to Gonewild, showing that the pseudonymity of the site is an important part of the way it is framed as a space for ethical, consensual, amateur naked photos that exist outside the realm of porn.

Questions on AskReddit that addressed the pseudonymity aspect of posting are especially relevant to the study – for example, whether Gonewild posts had ever leaked out of the subreddit and onto other parts of the web, or offline. Responses about the posts being seen by unintended parties or causing trouble for the posters varied greatly:

I posted once, and then my sisters fiance found it (I had no idea he was a redditor) he told me via facebook that he saw it, and then confessed his undying love for me, and how he never truly loved my sister, it was me he wanted, and he's been waiting for my current relationship to end. That was an awkward few months.

The chance that a future employer 1) is a Redditor 2) frequents GW 3) went on GW on the exact day I posted and saw my post amongst all the others and 4) would recognize me again out of however many women they've seen online and however many applicants they interview is a pretty slim one.

Found a nude of a girl I work with ... I was confident she didn't post it there judging by the title and I told her about it. I helped her get it removed and she was super thankful about everything.

In this way, the AskReddit questions and answers have given me some insight into Reddit-wide attitudes around Gonewild.

### **Images and image titles**

After recording Gonewild images from August 2013 to August 2014, and categorising the images by algorithm, gender, clothing, and body display, I have been able to get a sense of the kind of content that is regularly submitted. Because gender is such a prominent part of the way posts are tagged on Gonewild, I decided to first sort the posts by gender. This was simply done: I recorded the gender provided with each post. I wanted to understand how votes, which feed the way algorithms sort content, result in some images being made more visible by appearing on the 'hot' algorithm, while others sink due to the 'controversial' algorithm, so I recorded which genders appeared in 'hot', 'new',

and ‘controversial’ categories. While a closer exploration of gender would include the [mf] tag for both genders, [cd] for cross-dresser, [t] for transsexual, or [?] for a surprise (which would make the following percentages add up to 100), I am only presenting the posts tagged [m] for male or [f] for female, to streamline the process.

In total for the year, I recorded 3,844 individual images from Gonewild by taking screenshots of the main display of each algorithm. The screenshots varied in how many individual images they contained: most had seven images in them, but if a banner was featured then one screenshot might contain up to 12 images. There was an average of 11.4 per cent of posts tagged [m] in the ‘new’ algorithm, compared with 86.1 per cent tagged [f] – so there are already more women posting than men. But as people vote on content and algorithms kick in, these proportions change. Over the year, the ‘controversial’ algorithm on Gonewild featured an average of 36.3 per cent male tags, with 53.9 per cent female tags. And the ‘hot’ algorithm made it clear that women are more likely to be upvoted: they dominated, with 99.5 per cent of the algorithm, while the [m] tag made up only 0.3 per cent. This year-long content analysis has confirmed my initial expectation about Gonewild posters being mostly women. Although my primary interests in Gonewild are its pseudonymity practices and platform vernacular, these are undoubtedly influenced by the large proportion of women on the subreddit. This domination of women may go some way towards explaining the differences in how nude the photos were. About half the images had someone completely nude in them (50.4 per cent), which rose slightly in the ‘controversial’ algorithm (55.5 per cent), and fell slightly in the ‘hot’ algorithm (42.6 per cent). Keeping in mind the gendered dynamics of these algorithms, it seems slightly more likely that men post fully nude photos more than women. Overall, 22.6 per cent of the images showed someone in their underwear, 18.8 per cent partially clothed, and a small proportion fully clothed (8.2 per cent).

It is most common to see a full-body shot on the Gonewild homepage; this comprised 46.5 per cent of all the photos on the ‘hot’ algorithm. The popularity of the full-body shot comes despite the limitations of this form of self-photography. It obscures the labour of finding the time and private space in which to photograph the naked self; managing the position of the body, the pose, and the photography angles, a difficult task given that so many photos are taken while holding a camera or smartphone; then selecting the best or most successful shots to upload. By contrast to the female full-body shot, the ‘controversial’ algorithm featured more penises, or ‘dick pics’, than any other body part (25.6 per cent). Faces were comparatively rare: despite the fact that the subreddit is

intentionally a place for exhibitionists to 'go wild', it is more common for a photo on Gonewild to show a vagina than a face. This may partly be because of the way the voting algorithm works, as uncontroversial pictures are the most likely to have broad appeal, and are thus processed favourably.

Over the year, on average, 84.3 per cent of images on Gonewild did not contain the poster's face. Images were slightly more likely to feature a whole face, rather than just the poster's lips or eyes: on average, 8.5 per cent of images showed the face, while 7.2 per cent had a partial face in them. There was hardly any variation over the period of analysis. Not showing a face in the photographs is the norm, which is reinforced by the subreddit's guidelines, the attitudes gleaned from the AskReddit threads that it is shameful for women to post sexualised photos, and the images featured on the homepage: faceless bodies were consistently the majority of the images across the year-long period of analysis, despite a growth in subscriptions to the subreddit from 462,390 subscribers in August 2013 to 633,775 by August 2014.

The 15.7 per cent of posters who do show at least some of their face are acting against this established norm. They may be doing so to distinguish themselves from other posters, to reject the idea that naked photos are shameful, to be daring and risk being identified by someone they know, to demonstrate that they do not anticipate any negative consequences from having naked photos on the internet, or because they do not see a need to compartmentalise their Gonewild posts from the rest of their identity. Discourse around women taking and posting photos of themselves – selfies – has involved: discussion of the way platforms designed for sharing content make control over who sees selfies difficult (Senft & Baym 2015); deriding selfies as vain or vapid as a mechanism to disciplining selfies taken by young women (Rettberg 2014); the complex identity work involved in using the selfie as a camera, stage, and mirror all at once (Warfield 2015); women striving to present images that appear both good-looking and authentic (Mascheroni, Vincent, & Jimenez 2015); and women contending with the shared agency between people and platforms (Lasén 2015). The pseudonymity of selfies on Gonewild reconfigures the boundaries of online self-representation by confining sexualised selfies to an intimate, yet public, context.

Votes, algorithms, and moderators are curation processes that work together to establish the space as one that predominantly features sexualised selfies from young, slender, white women. To further investigate these pseudonymous naked photos, I have

considered the image titles to be an insight into the way the posters are presenting themselves. Examining the image titles meant looking at who the titles were addressing, how they described the subject of the photo, and what details about themselves they gave away within the predominantly anonymous context. Performing a content analysis on the image titles began by familiarising myself with the subreddit – for example, I noticed that many image titles contained playful pop culture references, so that became my first category. Because I had browsed the subreddit before formally commencing my content analysis, I had already begun an informal categorisation process: as Stake puts it, “analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations” (Stake 1995, p. 71).

Images on Gonewild are titled creatively, both to attract attention and to appeal to a sense of intimacy between the posters and their audience. Although in all likelihood those featured will never meet the people browsing their images, titles often specifically address an invisible subject as though they were in the same room. People who post often address either the general Gonewild audience, or what Litt and Eszter Hargittai (2016, p. 6) call a “phantasmal tie”, usually an imagined sex partner to whom they are showing off their body:

May I be your [f]uck toy?

I want a volunteer to grab me by the hips and bend me over ;) [f]

Naked in the kitchen! What do you want (f)or breakfast? :)

Please don't bother being gentle, because I won't ;) (f)

These titles adhere to the dominant narratives of the subreddit, as women here are addressing an audience of men. But in the mutual understanding of these norms, discourses of resistance also exist, challenging the conventions. Massanari argues that on Reddit, “playful interactions move beyond ‘mere play’ to reflect the cultural values of the community” (Massanari 2015, p. 125).

Some posts directly address the taboo of showing the face, by alluding to it as a special part of their post: “Showing face [f]inally on this sexual sunday. Hope I don't disappoint. Let me know what you think?”; “What's this? More pierced titties AND my [f]ace?”



Enjoy;)”, or explaining their lack of face as evidence of their own shyness or cowardice: “Would show (f)ace if I could...but I guess my body will have to suffice :)”, or, “I’m too much of a puss to show my [f]ace”, the latter of which accompanied a full-body shot in a mirror with a pink heart shape covering the poster’s entire head. In response to wider attitudes around Gonewild, including one *Daily Mail* journalist’s suggestion that it is “a personals page where women hungry for attention willingly pose naked for complete strangers” (Farberov 2013, n.p.), one post is sarcastically titled, “I’m a (f)laming attention whore. Compliment me!”, while the following post turns a negative comment from another Redditor into an appreciation post for fellow posters:

Some Redditors said my parents failed at raising me because I post to GW. Know what? I respect all the women on GW who are confident, sexy and have no shame about their bodies.

Other posters address the subreddit’s limitations as a space for particular bodies, such as the defensive self-identification, “Gw needs more Latinas [f]”. But a prominent feature of Gonewild posts is play around the very notion of being pseudonymous – image titles, and accompanying images, gesture towards all kinds of different identity signals, playfully revealing aspects of themselves that give an insight into the poster and their personality, but also potentially identifying them to people who know them. Baym (2011) argues that the most important identity signals may be someone’s name and photograph, as their authenticity creates trust, but other identity signals build a sense of intimacy and play into Gonewild posts. Through a content analysis of image titles collected over a year, I have compiled the eleven main identity signals in Gonewild image titles.

## **Identity signals on Reddit Gonewild**

### *1. Hobbies and activities*

Activities that lend themselves to becoming either naked or sweaty are well represented in my collection of image titles: the word ‘shower’ appears in 35 different image titles,

‘yoga’ in 16, and ‘gym’ in 14. It seems many posters take advantage of everyday situations for their sexual potential:

Yoga classes make me so naughty... Especially when I’m not wearing any undies..[F]

[F] I love to cook, and fuck!

In my old dance uni[f]orm, as promised.

Hey Riders fans, come snuggle with me before the big game? (f)

## *2. Brands and shopping*

Mentioning brands gives a sense of familiarity to the images, and can give information about the poster’s personality, a clue as to their location and, in the case of these US chain stores, a nod towards the US-based culture of Reddit:

A peek inside the Victoria’s Secret [f]itting room

Shot of naughty in your Starbucks? {f}

(F)lashing for reddit in the Walmart aisle!!

[F] Attention, Target shoppers :)

## *3. Objects, clothes, and costumes*

Including personal effects in images and image titles is an intimate gesture, particularly when sex toys are involved – these are very private objects, but may also mean the poster is recognisable to their lovers or partners. Clothes and costumes may be worn for occasions such as dress-up parties, introducing a sense of risk to the pictures and blurring the private and public:

Ride O(f) Into The Sunset (dildo, cowgirl solo)

“Wear a butt plug to work again” you said... So, I did. [f]

A grown-up schoolgirl out[f]it. Think I’ll get good grades this semester?

Got a new underwater camera. Had to test it out in the shower ;) (F)

#### *4. Locations: Cities, countries, and weather*

Mentions of location, even if vague, add detail about the culture someone comes from, and gives posts an intimate feeling:

A solid Australian break[f]ast is the most important meal of the day.

(F)un cali (F)emale :) new to posting :)

(F)ucked like a true Texas girl

Naked in San [F]rancisco

I love summer, and it’s one more reason not to wear clothes indoors! [F]

#### *5. Birthdays and ages*

Someone posting their age and birthday narrows down their identity, especially when people posting to Gonewild also have profiles on platforms like Facebook or Twitter, which publicise birthdays and prompt others to send birthday greetings:

Sent this Snapchat to my guy hoping [f]or some birthday sex

I’m almost 24! Make me feel better about being an old lady GW (f)

It’s my 21st Birthday! Any love? [F]

You Dared Me: Lingerie and Panties Album (39 years old, 2 kids)[F]

Not bad for (f)orty, huh?

## 6. *Occupations*

As much of the appeal of Gonewild lies in the assumption that these are women going about their everyday lives, sharing small moments of sexual intimacy with an audience, their occupations are often referenced in the image titles. While most posters keep things vague by simply mentioning college, study, work, the office, or their colleagues, some give more details about what kind of work they do or where they study:

Don't even bother taking my scrubs off! {f}

I don't usually like Mondays, but I'd like a little romp in the con[f]erence room!!

bad teacher on that new-school-year grind (f)

Horny college student busting out o[f] my shirt... (first post)

Headed to a job interview at a Christian kids camp...seemed appropriate to post  
[f]or y'all first

## 7. *Families and relationships*

More identity signals reside in the identification of other people in this person's life, such as partners, parents, and children. Posts sometimes contain the term MILF, an acronym for Mom I'd Like to Fuck; first popularised by the 1999 teen film *American Pie*, MILF has since become a porn category to designate porn actors who are mothers, or have mature-looking bodies:

[F]irst post, husband encouraged. Does Reddit like?

My boy[F]riend wasn't too interested when I decided to strip for him on skype  
last night. Decided to show you boys instead. :)

Got dumped last night, came here (f)or some love...

This pastor's daughter is going to hell.. {f}

Up hal[f] a cup size already! Thought I'd share the joy that my soon-to-be  
motherhood is bringing (:

Who's up for a quickie this afternoon with this MILF? ;) [F]

## 8. *Pop culture references*

While these vary between song lyrics, television show references, and film quotes, I didn't see one reference that is not from the US: the following image titles refer to the song *The bad touch* by the Bloodhound Gang (1999), song *Baby got back* by Sir Mix-a-Lot (1992), film *Ferris Bueller's day off* (1986), television show *My little pony: Friendship is magic* (2010), and film *The matrix* (1999), respectively. Such cultural references pack a lot of meaning into a short title, and further expectations that most Redditors are young, white, middle class, educated men. As Phillips (2015) argues of 4chan, referencing US pop culture from the 1980s and 1990s suggests an age range, and people communicating on the board perform maleness and whiteness, even if they do not belong to these categories:

I wanna be down in your south seas [f]

[F] Oh my God, Becky

Life moves pretty [f]ast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.

This morning in my [f]luttershy socks

Were you listening to me, Neo? Or were you looking at the woman in the red dress? (f)

## 9. *Ethnicities*

There are a whole realm of subreddits that focus on non-white identities, including AsiansGoneWild, HispanicsGoneWild, GoneWildColor, and IndiansGoneWild, which states on the sidebar:

Indian society tends to be very repressive when it comes to people expressing their sexuality, and nudity. You can show off your naked body here and remain anonymous!

Assuming an online identity that foregrounds an ethnicity can be a difficult process: the subject of race seems to be either completely invisible, because it goes unmarked and undiscussed, or the most emphasised part of someone's identity (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman 2000; Leung 2005). This all-or-nothing kind of identification can be seen in the way that subreddits devoted to particular ethnicities have proliferated – but people on Gonewild also find ways to bring their ethnicity into their posts without having it dominate, by mentioning their ethnicity, as in the image titles above, or cross-posting their photos so they appear on more than one subreddit:

(F) Who likes Asian boobies?? ;)

Ever seen a Persian girl naked? [f]

Any love for [F]ilipinas on GW? xpost from /r/AsiansGoneWild

Indian[f] 25..first-timer..being naughty..bent over for you!! which one do you like?

Just some 18 y/o Indian ass. (F)

Every girl has a WILD side...especially Hispasians;) [f]

## *10. Offline people*

It is rare that people either directly address someone they have met offline, and rarer still that people meet each other based on Gonewild posts, but from time to time the boundaries between Gonewild and offline life blur into people finding each other:

Hey, guy flirting with me at Starbucks! I saw you were on reddit, you should've asked for my number.. {f}

Recently started dating someone I met [f]rom ladybonersGW, and we play rather hard. Thank you, internet!

Turns out, the hot waiter I gave my number to is a redditor. Maybe he'll see this? (F)

I heard a guy discussing gonewild at a coffee shop today. Maybe he'll get lucky and [f]ind this ;)

### *11. Faces*

When posters mention their face, it is most often to distinguish their post from previous posts in which they have deliberately left it out. Because most posts on Gonewild do not include faces, my image titles specifically mention it as a point of difference, especially when it is something new they are revealing:

[F]irst post showing my face ;)

Showing face [f]inally on this sexual sunday.

Showing a little bit o(F) everything.. including my face again ;)

Although they do not reveal much about a poster's life outside Gonewild, the image titles that reflect on the process of posting and having images voted on and appreciated (or unappreciated) took me into my next phase of Gonewild research: conducting a survey in which I asked people who posted to Gonewild for further reflections:

[F]irst post, and hopefully not the last!

My [f]avorite albu[m] got caught in the spam filter – Hopefully you'll give it a second chance?

Damn, 100K karma...thanks for all the love you've given me; y'all are the best!  
Cheers! {f}

Dear GW, for the next 2 months, I won't be able to provide for your [f]antasies.  
Hope this [m]assive album tides you over ;)

My [f]inal gonewild post. Hopefully I saved the best for last.... Thank y'all!

The identity signals found in these image titles are unique to Gonewild as they are addressing a specific audience: people who are expecting to see exhibitionist self-portrait photographs of strangers. The function of the image title on Gonewild is to add contextual detail that orients the audience by revealing information about the person in the image, and often, a glimpse into the circumstances that led to their nudity. This practice is situated within Reddit's platform layout, which only allows text posts or links to media like photos, then displays posts as a thumbnail image with a title. Because of this, image titles introduce the audience to the poster. On other platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, content appears with a person's username and profile picture next to it, which is linked back to a fixed profile with more information about that person. Further to this, to receive posts on these platforms, people need to have first been friended or followed, meaning their posts are already contextualised by this existing relationship or interaction. These are no such formalised connections on Reddit: people on Gonewild are scrolling through posts that are made about the specific topic of sexualised self-portraits, not because they are part of each other's networks. Some of the identity signals present in the image titles are the kinds of information that would appear in a profile on another platform, such as age, location, occupation, or relationship status. Other identity signals, especially ones that refer to a moment in time like a rainy day, a shopping trip, or a Halloween costume, might be included in a Facebook caption or a tweet. Image titles on other platforms also do the work of providing context, while assuming an audience of people who are acquainted with the poster in some way.



Returning to Couldry's theory of media-related practices to analyse these images and image titles, I have again considered the practice of showing and being shown. "Showing is just one of a wider set of ways in which once-private life is being projected beyond its normal boundaries", Couldry (2012, p. 53) argues. Although these images are seen by many people, the image titles are addressed as though speaking directly to a lover, a form of seduction that commands that a certain kind of attention be paid to these images. Showing on Gonewild is a variety of practices that intersect with the three others Couldry (2012) identifies: searching, presencing, and archiving. Couldry refers to these as "single" media-related practices, which converge into dynamics of "complex" practices such as keeping up with the news, or staying in touch with people. In this way, participating in Gonewild becomes part of a complex media-related practice of mediating sexuality, involving producing or consuming erotic images in order to arouse or be aroused. This is a set of media-related practices which is not likely to be limited to Gonewild, but may unfold over multiple sites and involve multiple practices.

## **Survey responses**

I received 32 responses to my survey of people who posted to Gonewild: 20 respondents listed their gender as female, 8 as male, 2 as genderfluid, and 2 did not nominate a gender. When I mention participants' genders later, I use their exact wording, whether it be 'woman', 'female', 'cis female', or 'F', to faithfully represent their responses. There were 21 respondents from the US, 3 from Canada, 1 each from Asia, France, Germany, and Norway, and 3 did not list a location. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 41, with an average age of 24. Having thought through the ethics of whether to credit Reddit comments to the person who made them or preserve their anonymity, it was important to me to offer my respondents the choice. Of the 32 respondents, 20 wanted me to include their pseudonym when quoting them, and 12 indicated they would prefer to remain anonymous. Twenty-eight people listed an occupation in their survey. The most common occupation was student, with 8 respondents, but after that the occupations varied. In their own words, respondents reported their occupations as software developer (2 people), accountant (2), social worker (2), office worker (2), lifeguard (1), mechanical assistant (1), hypnotherapist (1), exotic dancer (1), tattoo artist

(1), stay-at-home mother (1), hospitality worker (1), doctor (1), analyst (1), and dispatcher (1).

I asked respondents to check off or list social media sites they used in addition to Reddit. Some did not list any, others listed more than one. Responders also used Facebook (19 people), Snapchat (11), Tumblr (11), Instagram (8), Twitter, (5), LinkedIn (4), Pinterest (4), Skype (2), Yik Yak (2), and Google+ (1). Other sites listed included 4chan, Archive of Our Own (an archive for transformative fanworks), Flickr, Kiwi IRC (an IRC client), Xbox Live, PlayStation Network, and Slack (real-time messaging for businesses). One participant, a 28-year-old male, asserted that “the only social media outlet that I use is Reddit”.

Analysing these results involved a different process to coding a corpus of articles, blog posts, or AskReddit threads. Instead of trying to find mentions of pseudonymity within a larger corpus, I was working with answers to questions directly about pseudonyms. This thematic analysis aims to present some of the finer points of pseudonymity practices, as reported by people on Gonewild themselves. By first collecting the quotes I thought best represent the survey responses, then developing categories through identifying the points that are emphasised and repeated, I have ended up with three major themes, concerning the difference that posters noticed between their own online and offline identities, strategies for remaining pseudonymous on Gonewild, and the broader consequences of platforms allowing pseudonymity.

### *Differences between online and offline identities*

When I asked about the difference between online and offline identities, I was curious to know whether people on Gonewild see a separation at all – and have been surprised to discover that attitudes about online identities vary enormously, even within this small group. Some felt that, even with the pseudonymity strategies they employed, they were indistinguishable from their offline self. Participant 29 (female, 20) alludes to the common practice of obscuring the face when she writes: “I consider them [my online and offline identities] to be the same person, just one without a face”. LadyM (female, 34) says: “That is the beauty of the names [pseudonyms], you CAN be yourself”.

Although my data collection over the year-long observation of Gonewild included usernames, I have deliberately chosen not to write about them, despite this information featuring on a public bulletin board, because I don't have their explicit permission to do so. Nevertheless, I have argued that the username is of great importance to online self-presentation, and wish to present the usernames that Redditors in the survey provided. Of the 32 respondents, 20 opted to include their username along with their answers:

account\_destroyed (cis male, 27)

Acidfueled (Female, 23)

Aierly (Female, 28)

experimentation1 (male, 28)

GirlGoneWld (Female, 24)

JaChaTon (Female, 25)

Katie Bowties (female, 21)

Kooikerhondjee (woman (cis), 24)

LadyM (female, 34)

Lana (Female, 24)

petitearaignee (woman, 20)

prosperos-mistress (Female, mostly, but I like presenting as masculine sometimes, 22)

sexualizeme (female, born female, 20)

Sgt\_muffdawg (Male, 21)

StaysCold (Male, 25)

SweetSinner (F, 25)

TheBoscage (Male, 21)

these\_ginger\_titties (Female, 19)

Treehip (male, 26)

wild-country (female, 20)

The survey didn't contain a specific question asking participants to explain how they had chosen their username, but two respondents did anyway: Aierly revealed this was originally the name of a character she played on World of Warcraft, and Sgt\_muffdawg said:

Well I'm neither a "sergeant" in any military or para-military and I don't receive as much "muff" as I'd like to so I guess that's where I'm lying to myself. Might

have picked “dawg” because I was born the in the year of the dog. I mainly put that username together cause it sounded ridiculous and would get some kind of chuckle out of someone.

Some usernames seem deliberately feminine, like LadyM, Lana, Katie Bowties, and prosperous-mistress, while others, especially those belonging to men, remained ambiguous as to their owner’s gender identity: experimentation1, StaysCold, TheBoscage, and Treehip are all men who have chosen gender neutral usernames. From this small sample, it is clear that some of these accounts were created especially for the Gonewild subreddit, or at least used within NSFW or exhibitionist subreddits: experimentation1, sexualizeme, GirlGoneWld, SweetSinner, prosperos-mistress, and these\_ginger\_titties especially suggest this. The process of choosing a username can be carefully considered, meaningful, related to other aspects of an identity (such as a gaming handle), crafted to fit a specific subreddit, or simply picked because it looks funny.

Respondents enjoyed how Gonewild allows them to present different facets of their personality, especially that they could be more outgoing and confident. Participant 19 (male, 41) felt his pseudonym let him say things he would not say in a face-to-face situation: “My online identity (where I use a pseudonym) is much more open speaking”. Pseudonymity let Participant 15 (F, 25) feel free: “I’m quiet and reserved irl. But I can be anything I want to online”. Participant 10 (female, 20) thought of her pseudonymity on Gonewild as a way to reveal her true personality to others – but the pseudonymity of others meant they felt distanced from her: “Online I can let people see what’s under the quiet exterior. Their judgement doesn’t matter cause they aren’t real”.

Many responded that their Gonewild identity was a sexier version of their offline self, like Katie Bowties (female, 21), who sees her online persona as “a sex craved vixen who can’t wait to show off her body and have sex with strangers ... I’m not alike offline”. Similarly, Lana (female, 24) describes her Gonewild identity as an exaggerated version of herself: “My online identity is a more confident, attractive, bold version of myself. It’s like a character I have created, a sort of alter-ego”. Aierly (female, 28) even refers to her Gonewild pseudonym in the third person:

Aierly doesn't bare all the insecurities and pain I have in my real life. Aierly isn't a single mom who has to find a job or deal with her childrens dad. She is stronger more comfortable in her skin.

### *Strategies for remaining pseudonymous*

The most common strategies for remaining pseudonymous involved withholding information, especially names, faces, and locations, from Gonewild posts. Some went as far as to not reveal their taste in music, as they feared this might end up identifying them:

I would definitely never reveal things like my real musical taste, location, or more obscure experiences, which in real life are obviously fairly integral to my personality (Participant 2, cis female, 23).

Others didn't mind including their face in the images, but hesitated with other information: "i post my face, i'm not trying to conceal that aspect.. i'd never post my name" (Participant 32).

On Reddit, throwaways and multiple accounts are common strategies for compartmentalising different aspects of someone's identity. wild-country and Participant 32 both have throwaways that are separate to their main Reddit accounts: "I do not want my sex account linked to my regular Reddit account, and I do not want either linked to my real life" (wild-country, female, 20); "this is purely a throwaway account used to post nudes;" (Participant 32). petitearaignee (woman, 20) reported that she uses different usernames for a variety of social media, and is careful to keep the ones in which she is naked separate. Sometimes, multiple accounts are not enough: StaysCold (male, 25) says he gives people false information about his real name and location in a deliberate attempt to remain pseudonymous.

However, pseudonymity strategies can be compromised. This seems a particularly gendered issue: Participant 21 (male, 26) says: "It's quite easy to separate your different social media accounts", but women on Gonewild are often victims of attempts to find out

their identities. For Participant 25 (female, 19), being recognised by an ex “made the limits of pseudonymity clear”. LadyM (female, 34) says that on ten different occasions, people had sent her messages saying they knew her from her pictures, but nobody ever followed this up with real personal information. Kooikerhondjee (woman [cis], 24) has also been subjected to numerous attempts to link her real identity to her pseudonym, with one sexual partner reverse-Googleing an image of her, and tracing her photo back to Gonewild, and someone else on Reddit discovering her LinkedIn profile after she revealed to them her first name, city, and what she was studying. Kooikerhondjee panicked, thinking of an occasion when she had been sexting and shared a photo of her face that was also on her Facebook account. “They could have reverse searched it and found me”, she says. Katie Bowties (female, 21) says thousands of people want to out her, highlighting this as an ongoing issue: “They want a location, they want anything that can give them more than I already gave. They evaluate the most minute details of my pictures to see if they can recognize something they know”.

### *Pseudonymity can be beneficial or harmful*

Among reflections on their own pseudonymity practices are thoughts about social media pseudonymity more broadly. This is a group of people with personal experience of being pseudonymous, and as such they were very positive about the benefits that pseudonymity can bring. GirlGoneWld (female, 24) calls pseudonymity an outlet for people to express themselves without being judged by people they know. Participant 32 highlights the agency of being able to choose their own name, “unlike the names given to us at birth”. For Participant 7 (genderfluid, 20), pseudonymity is “a great way for someone who is socially anxious to explore the world they live in ... to share and feel good about thier [sic] body”.

For people posting naked and sexualised photos of themselves online, pseudonymity was also seen as a way to reduce the potential harm of having the wrong person see their photos. petitearaignee expands on what gendered reputation damage might involve:

Particularly in the context of /r/gonewild, ensuring that your identity is kept hidden is extremely important. There could be long-term ramifications in terms

of job acquisition and impacts on a poster's career if their identity is revealed. This is a product of a culture where nudity is frowned upon and women are considered less worthy if they show their body.

People also acknowledged that pseudonymous people can cause harm to others, but this was usually presented with the caveat that pseudonymity can also be beneficial. Acidfueled (Female, 23) argues that, "There are always people who will take advantage of an anonymous platform. That doesn't mean it represents a threat or a problem".

These pseudonymity practices demonstrate a keen understanding of how networked online platforms work, the vernaculars of the specific subreddit Gonewild, and what pseudonymity means for people sharing private parts of their bodies and their lives in a public subreddit. Studying Gonewild has led me to consider the pleasure that people derive from their pseudonymous Gonewild identity, and the agency they gain from being able to present themselves in the way they choose.

## **Conclusion**

Redditors consciously negotiate the platform when they pseudonymously post their naked selfies to Gonewild. Through their choice of names, what to reveal in the images, and how they title their submissions, they reveal that they are aware of the context of the subreddit, and are tailoring their identity to fit. The pseudonymous culture on Gonewild has brought a culture of hyper-curated, personalised, intimate, amateur photography into being. Pseudonymity on Gonewild means people submit a specific kind of content that playfully references itself, and uses disconnections of identity to create a platform vernacular of sexualised intimacy. In posting to Gonewild, Redditors are speaking back to porn culture, and to the uneven nature and false democracy of online content. They are acknowledging the limitations of the space – browsing on small screens, with limited access to data, with scant resources, with little personal, domestic privacy – and turning these into assets. They are playing on the limited angles, blurriness, and dim lighting available to a person taking mobile phone selfies to embrace a raw, authentic, and intimate genre of photography. For Daniel Palmer (2014), the front-facing camera on a smartphone facilitates self-portraits that are taken by

someone holding the phone in their hand, and perhaps browsed by someone else on their handheld phone, meaning the screen alternates between being a window and a mirror. The photographs on Gonewild act as markers of shared frustrations with porn, sexuality, body image, and digital culture that define the social media experience.

Pseudonymity on Gonewild makes it a space for self-exploration, which allows people to show off their naked, sexualised bodies without connecting this to their offline identities. Gonewild would have a very different audience if it did not place such an emphasis on pseudonymity: the platform flourishes in spite of other social media sites insisting that real names are necessary to make platforms useful and civil. By leaving their names and faces out of their images, people who post pseudonymously to Gonewild show an awareness of the internet as a networked media environment in which identity plays the crucial role of bringing together otherwise disconnected parts of life. The nameless, faceless bodies of Gonewild reveal some aspects of identity, while disconnecting these photographs from their searchable real names, and the recognisable marker of their faces. The importance of disconnection is emphasised by moderator xs51 when he warns posters not to include information in posts that can be entered into a search engine, as this will allow the posters to remain undiscovered. But the people who post choose what they reveal.

The first case study of this thesis has considered social media pseudonymity from an *affordance* approach, meaning I am interested in the specifics of platform design and interfaces, and how people contest these when it is stipulated that real names are to be entered into the boxes on the screen. In studying Reddit Gonewild, I have taken a media *practice* approach to focus on the actions involved in posing for, capturing, selecting, captioning, uploading, and interacting with pseudonymous, sexualised images within the framework of the votes and algorithms that make up the subreddit.

But this pseudonymity is not always stable. The third case study moves away from how platforms are deliberately designed to be named spaces, and how people use platforms pseudonymously, to consider how connections can be forced between people and information. I take on the theme of *disruption* to present a comparative case study of prominent Redditor Violentacrez, and Australian political blogger Grog's Gamut, who were both unmasked – or doxed – by journalists, to examine the consequences of having pseudonymity disrupted.





## CHAPTER 6

# Pseudonymity disrupted: Making forced connections through doxing

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### Introduction

The previous chapter has examined how those posting to amateur pornography subreddit Gonewild often choose to hide their identities while showing intimate photographs of their bodies. Most of the people posting to Gonewild are successfully contextualising their playfully sexual identities by strategically revealing some parts of themselves while concealing other personal information. But some Gonewild posters have had to contend with people trying to find out who they are, and where they work and live, in order to expose them to embarrassment or harm.

I now ask what happens when someone's pseudonymity is disrupted, by taking on a comparative case study, exploring news articles and blog posts about two incidents of pseudonymous content producers being doxed – having their personal information revealed. I consider the concept of doxing in relation to anthropological theory about masks and unmasking. On social media, using a pseudonym can be like putting on a mask: it confers a different status on a person, whether this is for performative value, or to avoid being associated with particular posts.

Using a pseudonym is one way in which people seek control over their identity online. When people communicate under a name they choose, they are engaging in a process of making their message meaningful by constructing and reconstructing their identity in a series of negotiations between individuals, groups, organisations, and interfaces. The previous two case studies have considered pseudonymity as an affordance, focusing on the platform, and as a practice, investigating people's actions. I now examine doxing as a way in which these affordances and practices can be disrupted. Doxing involves the interplay between an individual and the people who surround them on the platform they use, and it extends out to the broader social media landscape, and to the offline realm. This chapter is a case study of two examples in which the revealing of a legal name, a

city, and an occupation identified someone, in both instances men, which meant they became targets for criticism as a consequence (and, in one case, lost their job). In both instances, the doxings became newsworthy events, with news narratives around the doxings reinforcing the idea that pseudonyms are false names.

I ask what happens when forced connections are made between someone's real name and their pseudonymous online presence, by examining news articles and blog posts about two doxings from the early 2010s. At this time, ideas around online identity, anonymity, and pseudonymity were shifting as the use of networked social media platforms grew. The media event of someone being doxed garnered attention, and therefore profit, for the platforms on which the doxing occurred, as well as the news platforms hosting the story. Platforms profit from doxings because they are stories about the power struggles between platforms, news institutions, and people on social media. When journalists dox people on social media, it is easily read as a battle between those who have formal cultural capital and a platform from which they are employed to speak, and a newer form cultural capital involving people generating content on open platforms. This form of institutional power has ramifications for the people targeted by journalists for a story.

As I have explained in Chapter 3, the early 2010s were a period of great change in the social media environment. Many social media platforms, like Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and Facebook, were around five years old, and were beginning to shift the ways people communicate, work, and find information. In both cases, someone on social media was doxed by a journalist, threatening the participation of everyone else on that social media site. This comparative case study is the first to examine Violentacrez and Grog together, although columnist Jason Wilson (2010; 2012) has written about both doxings separately – he quit Twitter in 2010, as he felt Grog's doxing threatened his own privacy, and in 2012, Wilson called Violentacrez' pseudonym a "mask of privilege" (Wilson 2012, n.p.), arguing he used it to systematically violate the privacy of others.

These doxings are indicative of tensions between identity and anonymity, professional and personal identities, and public and private information. I use content analysis to investigate them, emphasising the way the doxings were framed and debated through commercial news media and blogs as a form of popular commentary. By focusing on the question of whether the doxings were justified, I am really studying attitudes towards pseudonymity, building on the anthropological theory about masks. As anthropologists

have shown, masks serve a social purpose of maintaining distance between different facets of identity, whether for play, ritual, or to highlight particular aspects of the self. Pseudonym practices are also a way of engaging in identity work in order to preserve these forms of distancing. Although doxing can be framed as a type of investigative journalism, it represents a more significant form of social disruption that signals broader issues with creating and contextualising social media identity.

In order to properly contextualise these two case studies, I first provide a background to the idea of ‘unmasking’. Masks are powerful metaphors for the changing – or hiding – of identity and, as such, ‘unmasking’ was the most commonly used term to describe the disruption of the pseudonymity of both men. I then explore two other terms for unmasking people in specifically online contexts: doxing, and its Eastern counterpart, the human flesh search engine.

## **Unmasking**

As they are used in performance, ritual, play, and celebration, masks conceal a person’s identity by covering the face – but they can also reveal things about a person and their culture. Jarich Oosten argues that the use of masks “provides an insight into the relations between different perspectives on human identity” (Oosten 1992, p. 113).

### *Anthropological perspectives on masks and unmasking*

Drawing on a range of anthropological studies, I argue that masks share important features with pseudonyms: they are chosen or created to amplify some aspects of identity while downplaying others. In Chapter 2, I have explored Goffman’s work, which argues that identity is not something that lies at the core of the self, but is performed (Goffman 1963). In a discussion of masks, it is important to avoid essentialising identity by assuming that either the mask or the face represents the true self. All interactions are strategic, and involve expression games of revealing and concealing information. When the possession of a secret ‘fails’, or is revealed against the person’s will, as in the case of doxing, this can damage performances, appearances, and reputations (Goffman

1970). In his explanation of identity as a performance, Goffman quotes Robert Ezra Park:

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word 'person', in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role ... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves (Park in Goffman [1956] 1990, p. 11).

In this chapter, masks are helpful to examine because they illustrate that identity work, which is performative and not just a means of simply naming something that already, immutably exists, is taking place through the construction and display of the mask. Given the long and diverse history of masks, there are varied approaches to the study of them by anthropologists. I have paid attention to the anthropological work on masks that considers their meaning and social function in terms of how they are used as part of a presentation of the self. I believe this line of thought best connects with the contemporary context of doxing.

According to Donald Pollock (1995), masks are any semiotic system that disguises or transforms identity; masks work by operating on the ways identity is expressed in a given culture. Masks are not only coverings of the face, for Pollock. He gives the example of the Kulina Indians in Western Amazonia, who disguise their voice during healing rituals, because verbal performance is the site within which identity matters most in this cultural setting. Victor Turner studies masks that are part of the carnival tradition, in which business and traffic, two hallmarks of life away from leisure, are banished from the streets so people can embrace play. Masks are “devices to make visible what has been hidden, even unconscious” (Turner 1986, p. 106) as people shed their inhibitions and allow themselves to engage in behaviour that they would not engage in without a mask. The tradition of using masks to allow people to get in touch with primal elements of themselves is well documented. Tim Ingold’s investigation of masks concerns animal masks used by Australian Aborigines and Inuits from the circumpolar North to represent the relationship between humans, animals, and the land. When people wear animal masks, the intent is not to disguise their identity, or to be mistaken for an animal, but to reveal the true face, or spirit, of the animal. Masks that represent

animals perform an entirely separate function from clothing made from the skin of an animal: “Dressed in its skin, the human acquires the effectivities of the animal; donning the mask, the human makes way for the spirit of the animal” (Ingold 2002, p. 125).

Oosten also discusses Inuit masks as celebrating the ancient unity of human and animal: “masks represented not only the outward appearance of a being but also its spiritual nature” (Oosten 1992, p. 132). Because the mask claims so much meaning and authenticity as an aspect of identity someone has chosen, it is considered a particular violation to unmask someone, or reveal their face or name. Unmasking refers to either removing a literal mask from someone’s face or, in a more figurative sense, disclosing someone’s true character by exposing them. Writing about pseudonyms in seventeenth-century Germany, Martin Mulsow argues:

The use of the metaphor of ‘unmasking’ indicates that the problem had to do with authority ... for whoever used it, the mask could mean an increase in authority; unmasking then automatically undermined this presumptuous authority (Mulsow 2006, p. 221).

As explored in this chapter, in the case of journalists unmasking people on social media, the unmasking was a way to exercise their institutional power in order to undermine someone else’s ‘presumptuous authority’. Mulsow regards unmasking of authors as a particularly abhorrent act, calling it “symbolic violence” and “literary tyranny” (Mulsow 2006, p. 220). Michael Taussig in *Defacement: Public secrecy and the labor of the negative* (1999) describes the “cut” of unmasking as an act that releases a strange surplus of negative energy; sacrificing an idea or person in pursuit of the truth. Taussig argues that the face is “at the magical crossroads of mask and window to the soul” (Taussig 1999, p. 3), as someone’s face can both reveal or hide their true intentions. For Taussig, unmasking is the process by which the truth behind a secret is revealed through an act of defacement. Ideas that revealing secrets comes from incurring damage date at least as far back as 1901, when Georg Simmel wrote that secrecy involves a tension which climaxes at the point of revelation: “Secrecy sets barriers between men, but at the same time offers the seductive temptation to break through the barriers by gossip or confession” (Simmel 1906, p. 466).

Reflecting on Taussig's work on the public secret, Sasha Newell (2013) argues that the classic performance of masking is when men don masks to perform as supernatural beings – she lists ancestors, forest spirits, and deities as examples, but I would add Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny – for women and children, who all pretend not to know who is behind the disguise. These bluffs, explains Newell, are an illusion that is known to be false, but has real and potent value. She draws on Taussig's work to explain that the relationship between knowledge and power is mediated by public secrecy, and that a secret only has power when people are aware it exists, like a face beneath a mask. When masks have the potential to represent important facets of a person's identity, unmasking is a particular violation. It strips away the cover that a person has carefully constructed, at once taking the spotlight off the aspect of themselves they wish to highlight, and connecting unwanted aspects of that person together. These connections function in a particular way when the mask is a symbol for a social media pseudonym.

### *Online pseudonyms as masks*

Masks are a particularly compelling metaphor for the often fractured online identity practices of the early 2010s, especially when the activist collective Anonymous became famous for the visual spectacle of wearing a particular mask based on the cultural legacy of the Guy Fawkes mask, as worn by the anarchist revolutionary character V in the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (Moore & Lloyd 1988) and its 2006 film adaption. The mask hid the identities of Anonymous members, but also served as perhaps the first materialisation of troll culture offline (Leaver 2013). In Coleman's book on Anonymous, *Hacker, hoaxer, whistleblower, spy* (2014a), she notes that a 2008 Code of Conduct video for Anonymous protests encouraged members to cover their faces in order to protect them from being identified by hostile parties, but explicitly stated there was no need to use masks to do so, a statement Coleman says now appears ironic. The Guy Fawkes mask has become Anonymous' signature icon, she claims, broadcasting the group and its values. Later in the book, reflecting on a meeting with an Anonymous member who would later be revealed as an FBI informant, Coleman muses:

When someone is wearing a mask, there is at least a symbolic reminder that insincerity, duplicity, and play might be at work ... We can never really access the inner thoughts of other humans; we can only attempt to gauge sincerity or authenticity (Coleman 2014a, p. 335).

Through using the mask as a symbol for their anonymity, she argues, Anonymous “took the dynamics of theatrical trickery and transferred them from the Internet to the everyday life of resistance” (Coleman 2014a, p. 399). While masking is often considered in negative terms, such as shirking responsibility or hiding, Coleman argues that resistance through masking and anonymity can enable a constructive way of being in the world that refuses to allow governments to track citizens or corporations to profit from personal communication.

Masks also provide a metaphor for pseudonyms online, which is why this chapter pays attention to the processes of unmasking someone by revealing the name behind their pseudonym. An early example of masks to represent pseudonyms can be seen in a manual for the EIES (Hiltz & Turoff [1978] 1993): the section on ‘pennames’ is illustrated with two theatrical masks, one frowning, one smiling. Caroline Humphrey deploys the metaphor of masks in her work on Russian chat rooms, calling chat room pseudonyms “masks”, and offline identities “faces”. She claims that “the social life among the masks in the chat room can sharply affect subjectivities and relationships in the mundane, territorialized world” (Humphrey 2009, p. 31). Writing about IRC, Brenda Danet argues that “the typed text provides the mask” (Danet 1998, p. 6). The mask of the pseudonym hides people’s identity and calls attention to the mask itself, the person’s ‘virtual guise’. Like the carnival, communication on social media can be strikingly playful. Danet, Lucia Ruedenberg-Wright, and Yehudit Rosenbaum-Tamari (2006) posit that carnival masks provide a releasing effect, while online the absence of non-verbal and other identity cues frees people to either become someone else, or become more of themselves than they usually express.

Reasserting the authenticity of the mask, Danny Miller in his study of Facebook in Trinidad expands the Oscar Wilde maxim, “give a man a mask, and he will tell you the truth” (Wilde [1891] 2009, p. 174):



A mask or outward appearance is not a disguise. As something you have crafted or chosen and not merely been born with, the mask is a better indication of the actual person than your unmasked face ... it follows that the truth about yourself is revealed to yourself by what you post on Facebook. On Facebook, you find out who you are (Miller 2011, p. 179).

In networked communication, faces and masks offer a metaphor for real names and pseudonyms: someone with a pseudonym has a secret, and what cannot be found out about them demonstrates they have control over their own identity. As these anthropologists suggest, masks, and what people do when they are masked, reveal important things about the wearers' culture and their place within it. Taking this idea into my study of social media pseudonymity has meant considering a pseudonym to be revealing in itself – how someone chooses to present themselves when they aren't showing their name or face communicates a lot about them. But most importantly for this chapter, anthropological theory on masks has made me pay attention to what is lost when the mask is taken away: freedom, agency, and power. I have noted earlier that Mulsow (2006) regards unmasking as a way to undermine presumptuous authority. Especially in the case of Grog, whose blog rivalled other political commentary, revealing his personal information was an attempt to undermine him and reinstate the institutional power journalists hold.

In an online context, unmasking someone is called doxing (sometimes spelled 'doxxing'): compiling and releasing documents, or 'docs', of personal information about someone (Honan 2014).

## **Doxing**

Revealing a name behind a pseudonym without the subject's consent, specifically using networked media, is a revenge tactic originally from 1990s hacker culture on the messageboard Usenet (amanda b 2014). It is a "powerful weapon" (Honan 2014, n.p.), as it opens people up to scrutiny, harassment, and even legal action. Doxing is harmful not only because it surfaces information that someone has chosen not to feature in

connection with their name, but also because it recontextualises this information in a harmful way. Even if someone's details are available through an online search, Katherine Cross argues that to dox is to elevate certain information:

There's a difference between info buried in small font in a dense book of which only a few thousand copies exist in a relatively small geographic location versus blasting this data out online where anyone with a net connection anywhere in the world can access it (Cross 2015 n.p.).

Journalist Noah Berlatsky makes a similar point when he calls doxing a form of "weaponised attention": "Posting a number and declaring: 'This person is Satan, please let them know you hate them' is an extremely aggressive act" (Berlatsky 2016, n.p.). Sarah Jeong (2015) is dismissive of the idea that revealing someone's name, occupation, and city of residence is enough to be counted as a doxing: for her, doxing must include a home address, phone number, or social security number. But I argue that if someone can be publicly identified within a context of them performing some kind of wrongdoing, this alone is enough to cause them a great deal of harm. What Jeong has identified is that doxing rests on the idea of people having documents, or data, that uniquely identify them. These documents may be official identification instruments such as a passport, driver's licence, or birth certificate, but equally importantly may be a home address, workplace, mobile phone number, email address, Twitter handle, or Facebook page. Doxing forces connections between data points.

Deliberately revealing someone's personal information, and making it publicly visible, is an exercise of power: Jeong calls doxing "a policing of the Internet as a public space" (Jeong 2015, n.p.). As mentioned in Chapter 5, the fear of having this information become known is the fear of having unwanted attention directed through these channels. As Torill Mortensen puts it:

The terror of doxing isn't having your address and phone number revealed but what may come after. The 'doxer' leaves information in public, implying 'do what you like with this' (Mortensen 2016, p. 7).

Exposing a home address carries with it a specific threat to home security: an email or social media address can be used to flood its owner with correspondence, which can be abusive as well as drowning out important messages; linking a person with details of their occupation can compromise their professional reputation, or have them fired. Doxing makes a target vulnerable by revealing that the kind of identifying personal information that is available about someone is not always their choice, but “exists in a context of power and consent” (Dash 2014, n.p.).

The existing, albeit limited, scholarship on doxing asserts that to dox someone damages the control they have over their online identity. Publicly documenting personal information is a violation of privacy, claims Joseph Reagle (2015), who suggests that the purpose of doxing is to make anonymous people accountable, and to harass. Martin Shelton, Katherine Lo, and Bonnie Nardi (2015) agree that doxing is a violation: it disrupts expectations about how someone’s personal information will be treated, especially when they themselves have deliberately engaged in selective disclosure across a variety of social contexts. Doxing renews our interest in the boundaries of public/private and online/offline, say Laurie McNeill and John Zuern (2015), who consider doxing to be one way in which self-performances in digital spaces are policed: to dox someone is to assert power over them. David Douglas (2016) classifies doxing into three types, each aiming to damage something different about the subject: anonymity, obscurity, and credibility. In my case studies, doxing causes damage along all three of these axes he identifies.

According to law scholar Daniel Solove (2007), internet shaming helps society to maintain norms of civility – but it can be dangerous when it goes unchecked. Solove argues that the internet is becoming a powerful tool for norm enforcement, as shaming someone publicly exposes their identity, linked with their transgression, and can leave an indelible mark on someone’s reputation. Shaming has the potential to spiral out of control, meaning people are permanently branded with what Solove calls a ‘digital scarlet letter’, without due process and disproportionately to their infraction. Doxing occurs outside the legal system, forcibly connecting people to misdemeanours of all kinds, without all the facts being carefully weighed. Journalist Jon Ronson in his book *So you’ve been publicly shamed* investigates his own notion that the public deployment of shame is “the democratization of justice” (Ronson 2015, p. 9) by talking with people

who have been shamed. Ronson claims reputation is everything, and being shamed online can cause lasting reputation damage, especially when search engines automatically compile data about someone and end up returning one particularly unflattering aspect of their identity when someone searches for their name. Ronson concludes that “we are defining the boundaries of normality by tearing apart the people outside of it” (Ronson 2015, p. 269).

After programmer Kathy Sierra was doxed by having her home address and social security number posted online, she cancelled her keynote speech at a conference and moved house – she was being targeted as an outspoken woman in the technology industry (Reagle 2015). Sierra sees her doxing as a “*devastating* message about what was acceptable” (Sierra 2014, n.p.; emphasis original), because she claims she was doxed as a warning to other women in technology: that speaking out will be punished. Coleman (2012) argues that doxing is a spectacle that functions as gatekeeping: when trolls dox people, they are putting a ‘virtual fence’ around what they consider to be their territory, punishing those who do not conform to expected standards of communication. Furthermore, doxing exceeds the boundaries of the internet. Doxing is such a threat because it ruptures boundaries between contexts that have been kept separate: professional and personal, public and private, online and offline.

In each of my two cases of doxing, personal information about someone was discovered by a lone journalist who deliberately sought them out. In China, the practice of *renrou sousuo*, or the human flesh search engine, involves documenting a misdemeanour, then spreading information about the offender through networks with the hope that it will reach people who have more information to add about the person being sought out.

### *The human flesh search engine*

The internet is heavily censored in China, and there is a cultural emphasis on bulletin boards that resemble 4chan or Reddit. These forums are large, participatory, and public, and while the content on them varies wildly, since around 2001 they have played host to a number of human flesh searches. These follow a pattern: in public, an individual transgresses a cultural norm. The moment is documented, the transgression is posted online, word spreads, people find and post sufficient personal details about the person in

order to identify them, and the transgressor is subjected to hurtful comments and ridicule. Zona Yi-Ping Tsou (2015) argues that the human flesh search engine is one side of a significant process that has emerged with online culture. She positions a flash mob as the other side of this process: when people use the internet to get together, but for civic participation and organised fun rather than revenge. I propose instead that finding a lost relative or friend online is the 'other side' of the human flesh search engine, because this process also draws on a network of connections between people, facilitated by the internet, to locate a person – but instead of exacting a punishment, it aims to reconcile two people.

Although the practice of doxing, or releasing someone's documents, is similar, in Asian countries the concept of 'losing face' or being publicly shamed for an action is exceptionally damaging to one's reputation, and the reputation of one's family. Shame is a cultural phenomenon that is intensified in Chinese culture, as it tends to be characterised as more collectivist than individualist: the Chinese notion of 'face' or honour is of crucial cultural importance (Xin-an, Cao, & Grigoriou 2011). The result of a human flesh search engine is to make someone lose face in retribution for their actions. Human flesh search engines have been criticised as being "witch hunts" (Beijing Review 2008 n.p.), "cyberbullying" (Hatton 2014 n.p.), and "vigilante justice" (Downey 2010 n.p.), and commentators have called for stricter policies to ban them from occurring (Cheung 2009), as the person being targeted is often punished disproportionately to their actions, and sometimes incorrectly identified.

Controversial though the practice is, the attention a human flesh search engine garners is a testament to what cultural values are being questioned or re-formed. For example, in China, while animal abuse is not technically illegal as no animal-protection legislation currently exists (Levitt 2013), a violent video of a kitten being stomped to death by a woman wearing high heels was still abhorred by the Chinese public enough for them to collectively seek retribution; the video was shared until someone identified her, leading to her being fired from her job and publicly humiliated (Cheung 2009). Law enforcement does not always interfere with the outcomes of a human flesh search engine. Sometimes the results are wilfully ignored, according to David Herold (2011, p. 128), who describes the Chinese internet as "carnavalesque", arguing that the wildness of a human flesh search engine is, within limits, permissible and even encouraged by the state, if it contributes to harmony offline. It is a form of online collective action that is not always about personal privacy and harassment: the human flesh search engine can

also be a form of protest, like its application in exposing information with the goal of pressuring governments to remove public officials, since corruption is a challenge in contemporary China (Gao 2016). American Chinese author Xujun Eberlein says of the phenomenon: “You want to kill the rat, but you also have to worry about smashing the treasured dish it is in. The treasured dish ... here is freedom of speech” (Eberlein in O’Brien 2008, n.p.).

Like masks, pseudonyms provide an insight into what identity means to people and cultures. Seeing the variety of functions that masks can perform means understanding that the motivations behind, and strategies for, pseudonyms can be equally as diverse. The anthropology perspectives on unmasking all agree that to unmask someone is a violation: it takes away someone’s choice to use a mask or pseudonym, exposing them to damage and harm.

The two cases that follow investigate why the two men chose to use pseudonyms on social media, and what they lost when these pseudonyms were connected to their real names, and to other information about them. Both are examples of doxing, as distinct from the human flesh search engine. Rather than being a specific, culturally inappropriate incident galvanising members of the public to collectively seek retribution, it was media professionals who personally objected to what Grog and Violentacrez were posting. As pseudonymous bloggers, they represented a threat to journalists: Tim Highfield and Axel Bruns (2012) argue that blogs provide opportunities to circumvent traditional media, because blogs are self-publishing.

### **Case studies: Grog’s Gamut and Violentacrez**

I now detail the two cases: that concerning Australian political blogger Grog in 2010, on the one hand, and that of US Reddit moderator Violentacrez in 2012, on the other. These doxings are symptomatic of the early 2010s, during which social media use and the news media’s online presence were growing, and this was changing the media landscape. The clash between old and new media was a recurring theme in the coverage following the doxings, as they both involved a media professional doxing someone on social media, punishing them by making forced connections between their name and other facets of their identity. The idea that doxing reveals someone’s true character privileges official names, discrediting pseudonyms and, by extension, the online realm.

*Grog's Gamut: The influential political blogger*

When a pseudonymous blogger lashed out at the journalists of the 2010 Australian election, claiming they were “not doing anything of any worth except having a round-the-country twitter and booze tour” (Jericho 2010a, n.p.), it caught the attention of Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC) director Mark Scott. The publicly funded national broadcaster took Grog’s Gamut seriously, adjusting its election strategy as a result of his criticism – and, in doing so, respecting Grog’s voice in the media landscape. Soon after, the *Australian* newspaper ran an editorial asking, “why should web writers escape scrutiny and responsibility?” (*The Australian* 2010, n.p.), with an article by James Massola doxing Grog as public servant Greg Jericho, who worked in the Department of Environment, Heritage, Water and the Arts. Massola (2010a) claimed Grog was influential to Australian politics, and therefore not deserving of a pseudonym.

While the editorial claimed Grog’s doxing was “a good story and good for the internet” (*The Australian* 2010, n.p.), the backlash was swift, with one comment on the article asking, “is the Australian implying that only journalists are ‘allowed’ to blog?” (Aitken in Massola 2010a, n.p.), and a headline in a rival newspaper charging, “Journalists’ jealousy behind a blogger unmasked” (Birmingham 2010, n.p.).

Grog responded through a disappointed blog post entitled ‘Spartacus no more’, in which he claims the lesson to be learned is “if you want to blog anonymously, don’t do it effectively” (Jericho 2010b, n.p.), referring to comments that he was so significant to election coverage that he deserved to be held to the same standards as professional journalists. The ensuing coverage on Twitter, the news media, and blogs called into question the role of anonymity and pseudonymity online, with some arguing that the doxing was an attempt to silence Grog’s voice (An Onymous Lefty 2010; Mary 2010). Grog was subjected to a review at work, which resulted in his employer instructing that he was not to blog about anything related to his job (*The Canberra Times* 2011).

The doxed Greg Jericho continued to blog, poking fun at his own doxing in one post that had Grog’s Gamut interview Greg Jericho, in which Jericho asserts that his blogging “isn’t a job – it’s a hobby. You do it because you love it!”, to which Grog replied, “Oh is that why I do it is it?” (Jericho 2011, n.p.). Jericho went on to write a book entitled, *The*

*rise of the fifth estate: Social media and blogging in Australian politics* (2012), in which he questions who makes decisions about whether a person is entitled to pseudonyms, arguing, “I didn’t owe it to anybody to say who I was, because I wasn’t demanding anything from anyone in return for my opinions or analysis” (Jericho 2012, p. 179.). His pseudonym was a playful one that he had used since his university days, when his untidy handwriting made ‘Greg’ look more like ‘Grog’ (Jericho 2010b).

Grog was doxed because his political blogging had made an impression on a journalist. Two years later, another journalist doxed someone whose social media content had caught his attention – but instead of political commentary, he was posting racist memes, jokes about violence, and sexualised photos of underage girls.

### *Violentacrez: The “biggest troll on the web”*

A Redditor posting and curating content on subreddits including r/jailbait, r/chokeabitch, r/rapejokes, r/beatwomen, and r/hitler, was the subject of an article by Adrian Chen in the gossip blog Gawker: ‘Unmasking Reddit’s Violentacrez, the biggest troll on the web’ (Chen 2012a). Violentacrez, who named himself after a pseudonymous blogger who felt ideas were more important than recognition (Violent Acres 2006), was revealed to be Michael Brutsch, a 49-year-old computer programmer who lived in Arlington, Texas. As a result, Brutsch was fired, losing his own and his wife’s health insurance (Holpuch 2012). As Reddit is invested in the pseudonymity of those on the platform, it saw Gawker’s doxing as a breach, and banned all links from Gawker<sup>10</sup> and its affiliate sites (Massanari 2015). Shifting the context of personal information can have consequences that extend to other people and parties in networked publics.

Violentacrez responded to the media attention through Reddit, with the pseudonym ‘mbrutsch’, as ‘violentacrez’ had been suspended. He confirmed the rumours that he had been fired from his job, sounding chagrined when he referenced the torrent of online

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<sup>10</sup> Since Violentacrez’s doxing, Gawker has been bankrupted by a lawsuit that the Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel backed, in retaliation for a 2007 Gawker article with the headline, ‘Peter Thiel is totally gay, people’. According to Thiel, Gawker had an “incredibly damaging way of getting attention by bullying people even when there was no connection with the public interest” (Thiel in Sorkin 2016, n.p.). In the final post on the site, Nick Denton lamented that when he founded Gawker, “there was a sense that the internet was a free space, where anything can be said” (Denton 2016, n.p.).



abuse directed at him: “If any of the dozens of death threats I’ve gotten were to make good on their promises, at least my wife would have the insurance” (mbrutsch 2012a). Meanwhile, Chen’s article won a Mirror Award, an award established by the private research institution Syracuse University which honours “writers who hold a mirror to their own industry for the public’s benefit” (Mirror Awards 2013, n.p.). Chen was surprised by the reaction to the story, which had over 1.2 million pageviews, claiming that he had not realised it would “set off a whole debate about anonymity on the internet” (Chen 2012b, n.p.).

## **Methods and ethics**

While the previous case studies have examined a single phenomenon, this chapter compares two: one doxing from the US in 2012, and one from Australia in 2010. According to Joe Feagin, Anthony Orum, and Gideon Sjoberg (1991), some of their best research has involved a small number of case studies in a comparative framework, as this gives an in-depth investigation of a particular phenomenon. In this chapter, I have chosen two cases of doxing that occurred in different contexts. Comparative case studies usually concern extreme cases rather than typical ones; they do not capture the full variety of a phenomenon, and they are not representative of a population (Ciaglia 2013). This is certainly true of the two case studies in this chapter; they do not represent every social media doxing, but are particular cases that prompted debates about anonymity and pseudonymity, which is why I have selected them.

At first glance, they may seem to represent opposing cases for and against doxing: Grog blogged about politics, while Violentacrez’ posts were crude, violent, and racist; Grog received a warning from his employer, while Violentacrez was fired and ridiculed online and in a television interview. But Grog’s circumstances do not build a case for doxing: he regrets having his information revealed against his will (Jericho 2010b; 2012).

Comparing the two doxings reveals that no matter what the circumstances or the way they are framed, doxing still has the potential to cause a great deal of harm.

The differences between the two cases must be noted, as the two doxings occurred in separate cultural contexts and time frames. Grog was doxed in 2010 in Australia, used Blogger, was referred to as a political blogger and, after a hiatus, began writing under his own name for news websites including the *Guardian*. Violentacrez was doxed in 2012

in the US, used Reddit, was characterised as a troll, and lost his job as a result of the fallout. But there are many similarities between these two cases which compelled me to select them for comparison. Both concern white men over 40, posting publicly accessible content online, who appeared at public events (Grog at the Gov 2.0 conference in Canberra in 2010, Violentacrez at a Reddit meet-up in 2012) under their pseudonyms, and were doxed by journalists against their will. Both men were married with children, had day jobs, engaged in creating and moderating social media content after hours and, after being doxed, responded publicly through their chosen platforms. Both doxings became media events, sparking wider conversations around internet identity, anonymity, and pseudonymity.

I have gathered information about the doxings from news aggregator Factiva, choosing an open-ended search that included all dates, sources, authors, and subjects. I have outlined in the introduction of this thesis how news articles and blog posts play an important role in shaping public discourse. But these two cases both began with the articles that performed the doxings – Grog was doxed in an article for the *Australian* newspaper, and Violentacrez in the news blog Gawker. The articles prompted all kinds of responses, from other journalists weighing in on whether the doxings were justified, or bringing up other issues around social media pseudonymity, to bloggers who were pseudonymous themselves and were scrutinising their own reasons for wanting pseudonymity in the context of others being doxed.

Investigating Violentacrez' doxing in particular led me to a particular quandary: what about deleted posts? Digital data can survive deletion, unlike destroyed paper data, which is not likely to ever be rediscovered. This has implications for research: much of the material on Violentacrez, including his own responses to being doxed, I recorded in 2012. By the time I redrafted this chapter in 2015 and 2016, much of this material had been deleted, only to appear elsewhere on the internet, such as in screenshots of private conversations posted to Reddit, or documented by third parties such as [/r/SubredditDrama](#), Storify pages, and website Know Your Meme. The ethical implications of retrieving deleted content can get murky, although in the case of Violentacrez it is likely he did not delete the content himself; moderators removed it.

By surfacing notable information from data not necessarily visible to everyone using a platform, there is potential to alter the experience of privacy for someone using social media (Highfield & Leaver 2015). I have used this deleted data due to a desire to

represent Violentacrez, at least partly, in his own words. In addition to his CNN interview, he had posted a few short comments about his doxing before they were deleted. There is little academic work on the ethics of deleted data, but Jim Maddock, Kate Starbird, and Robert Mason (2015) offer some preliminary thoughts after a workshop in which they discussed the ethical implications of including deleted tweets in their data set. At the crux of the issue, they argue, is tension “between methodological validity and a user’s right to be forgotten” (Maddock, Starbird, & Mason 2015, p. 2). In this case, Violentacrez did not necessarily want to be forgotten – his account was deleted by moderators, along with all the comments he had posted.

In a similar vein, I may have missed social media posts about the doxings that were deleted for fear the author themselves would be doxed. Craig Thomler (2010b, n.p.) asks, “how much public sector experience and diversity has been lost to our public debates due to Grog’s outing?” Extending his question, how much participation has been lost because of doxings everywhere? In researching this chapter, I can’t assess how many commenters fell silent, deleted their tweets or their blog posts, or were put off joining the conversation at all because it seemed too risky.

### **Results: How were the doxings justified?**

Using the keyword ‘Grog’s Gamut’ retrieved 67 results from 27 September 2010 to 6 April 2014, mostly from Australian newspapers and news sites including *The Australian*, *The Guardian*, *ABC*, *Crikey*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The Canberra Times*. Once I had sorted through them and discarded irrelevant results – some only mentioned that there had been a broadcast, or that Grog had blogged about something unrelated to his doxing – there were 42 about Grog. As I also wanted blogs to feature in the data collection, I searched Google News, then discovered that a blog post by Craig Thomler (2010a) contained an exhaustive list of media coverage on Grog’s doxing. Thomler’s list gave me a further 50 results, leaving me with a total of 92 news articles and blogs about Grog. I analysed this corpus using content analysis to sort the articles and blog posts into categories: whether they approved of the doxing; whether they were pseudonymous themselves; and whether they were writing for a blog or news site. In addition to the news articles and blog posts, I wanted firsthand accounts from the people who had been doxed. Grog wrote a follow-up post on Blogger after his doxing

(Jericho 2010b), and ended up writing a book (Jericho 2012), with the experience as one topic of many about social media in politics.

Using the keyword 'Violentacrez' retrieved 89 results on Factiva from 29 September 2011 to 28 February 2015, of which 58 were relevant – some articles only briefly mentioned that Violentacrez had been doxed, usually within an article that did not predominantly concern doxing or Violentacrez. For example, one article only included the search term because the article doxing Violentacrez won an award. These results were mostly from news outlets including CNN, Fox News, *The New York Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, and *The Washington Post*. Violentacrez' doxing was also covered on a number of technology news sites and blogs including *Wired*, *PC Magazine*, *Slate*, *GeekWire*, and *TechDirt*. Google News retrieved a further 50 results for the keyword 'Violentacrez', leaving me with a total of 108 news articles and blogs. To find a firsthand account of the doxing from Violentacrez, I discovered a deleted Reddit post he wrote (mbrutsch 2012a), and a television interview (CNN 2012). These accounts give insight into being the subject of a doxing and, in the case of Jericho's book, reflect on the experience years after it occurred.

### *Content analysis: Who deserved to be doxed?*

I began my content analysis by identifying the major themes of the news and blog posts about the doxings, and noticed that, in addition to themes of doxing and pseudonymity, both cases involved several other issues being discussed. Coverage of Grog's doxing included the divide between traditional journalism and blogging, discouraging speech, the power of employers to dictate conditions of their employees' private lives, professional codes of conduct, the role of public servants, and the divide between online and offline. In the Violentacrez case, there was discussion of free speech, gendered harassment, platform responsibility, moderation, private versus public, and online shaming. While these themes no doubt influenced the way both doxings were written about, my primary concern here is the way these cases highlight issues of social media pseudonymity.

When Grog was doxed, commenters often revealed their own attitude towards pseudonymity. One blogger writes that Grog clearly spelled out the boundaries between

his professional work and his blogging, and how his own pseudonym is part of establishing those boundaries: “Needless to say I write this as another pseudonymous blogger in a similar situation, so I can see exactly what Grog did and why” (Mallard 2010, n.p.). After asserting that it was not necessary to publish Grog’s identity, Bogurk (2010) reflects that the reason they do not use their real name on Twitter is to maintain boundaries between their job as a teacher and their personal life. Wheeze writes that while their real name is easy to find from their pseudonymous blog, “this has, largely, been something I have thought over and made conscious decisions about along the way” (Wheeze 2010, n.p.), and on Twitter, Jack the Insider outed himself as a response to the news of Grog’s doxing: “Bloody unnecessary but this will work in your favour. Btw, I’m Jack Hoysted. Not so interesting but in solidarity out I come” (Jack the Insider 2010, n.p.).

Offering an opinion about whether or not the doxings were justified was a common way of writing about both cases. Of the 54 articles that express an opinion about Grog’s doxing, 39 disagree it should have been carried out. Within the arguments that Grog should have been doxed rests the idea that social media threatens the landscape of journalism, and pseudonymous people threaten those who have their names and faces attached to their online communication. Massola’s articles position him as someone trustworthy and legitimate, because he writes under his own name: “With political influence comes responsibility and the need for accountability, in the same way that journalists are accountable for what they write, tweet and broadcast” (Massola 2010c, n.p.).

Even if Massola simply thought he was acting in the public interest, many reactions connected Grog’s doxing with broader media shifts, including that of Tim Highfield and Axel Bruns (2012), who claim it revealed an antagonism between professional journalists and their independent critics. Bruns comments that “it is difficult to see Massola’s action as anything other than a naked attempt to ... pressure [Grog] to tone down his criticism or to cease blogging altogether” (Bruns 2012, p. 420). Massola justifies his doxing by claiming that, as a popular blogger, Grog should be held to the same standards as professional journalists, and it does seem that journalists were the least sympathetic of the doxing. Journalist Annabel Crabb argued on Twitter that “I don’t think anonymity should be a right” (Crabb 2010a), and “you should ID yourself unless there is a good reason for not doing so” (Crabb 2010b). Ben Packham (2010) adds, “if you set yourself up as a critic whose opinions are worth listening to, you owe it to

readers to say who you are. It's about disclosure". Journalist Scott Murdoch agrees, claiming:

We put our names on our stories every day. Why is it different for the anonymous blogosphere ... especially ones that deal themselves into the national debate? (murdochs 2010, adapted from truncated original tweet).

The very opposite to this argument was also advanced: that since Grog was not a professional, paid journalist, he should have kept his pseudonymity (*The Canberra Times* 2010b). Others worried about the context collapse between Grog's personal and professional identities, claiming the doxing went too far because "it suggests public servants shouldn't have their own opinion" (Keane 2010, n.p.). More than one response to Grog's doxing employed a sporting metaphor to claim Massola played the man and not the ball (WolfCat 2010), making a distinction between anonymity and pseudonymity, as the latter is more open to critique because it is a stable identity. When someone is pseudonymous, "you can play the ball fine – not knowing who the author is only becomes a problem if you'd prefer to play the man" (Ziegler 2010, n.p.). Many felt that being doxed silenced not only Grog, but other bloggers too: "It's not in the interest of the rest of us that such voices be silenced", argues blogger An Onymous Lefty (2010, n.p.), while on Twitter, telester was concerned about the wider chilling effect: "Without anonymity some will feel they can't comment as frankly – or even comment at all. That's a drop in quality" (telester 2010, n.p.).

Using the content analysis to isolate just one issue – whether the doxings were justified – has given insight into broader attitudes around social media pseudonymity. But not all social media content is considered equally valuable: someone's losing their voice only seems to be regarded as a problem if they fit into a socially productive category of participation, like political blogging. When someone is posting and curating content that is offensive and violent, the justifications for anonymity and pseudonymity are reconsidered once again. In the case of Violentacrez, the general sentiment was that he deserved to be doxed.

Of the 54 articles and blogs that express an opinion about whether Violentacrez should be doxed, 49 agree with it, in contrast to the 15 out of 54 who agree Grog should have

been doxed. Although I had thought those who were pseudonymous themselves might be more likely to disagree with the practice of doxing, opinion was evenly divided between those who were pseudonymous themselves, and those who attached their name to their writing. Overwhelmingly, the main reason for thinking Violentacrez should have been doxed rests on the offensive content he was posting and curating on Reddit. Some were delighted with the doxing and saw it as justice for his actions: “There’s a delicious irony to the ‘Internet’s biggest troll’ getting trolled so very hard himself”, smirks Damon Poeter (2012, n.p.), while Zeynep Tufekci (2012, n.p.) argues that free speech should be “speech of the weak against the powerful, not a convenient excuse about their right to victimize and intimidate”. Lili Loofbourow (2012) was unsympathetic about his job loss, retorting that he was guilty of ruining the lives of the women whose photos he posted online. Some agree that he should have been punished, but felt uncomfortable with doxing as the method of doing so: journalist Sady Doyle (2012) says Violentacrez was a scapegoat for a much bigger problem, as it is easier to create a media spectacle, and harness online outrage, than it is to create a culture in which bigotry and sexual harassment aren’t tolerated.

Those disagreeing with Violentacrez’ doxing felt he was punished disproportionately to his actions. Zachary Cohn (2012, n.p.) writes an open letter to Chen, signing it “the internet”, in which he argues that doxing is unacceptable, because “you’re publishing someone’s personal information online, purposely creating an angry vigilante mob, and throwing them to the wolves”. Others argue that the doxing legitimised online lynch mobs: “nothing pleases humanity more than a good public shaming” (Eördögh 2012, n.p.). The term ‘mob’ is used again when Emily Bazelon writes that she first welcomed the doxing, but eventually felt uncomfortable with it:

There’s something so unsettlingly selective about the way in which we punish the few people whose bad Internet behaviors become mainstream notoriety ... There aren’t any standards for the vigilante justice mob (Bazelon 2012, n.p.).

As a white, middle class American male, Violentacrez is someone who wields much cultural power, and in responses this was often contrasted with the groups of people featured in the subreddits he curated: women, girls, victims of abuse, and ethnic minorities. A television interview with CNN drew on cultural references to reinforce

pseudonymity and trolling as the domain of those already in power, with the anchor calling his posts “creepy and twisted”, claiming that “he clearly enjoys the attention”, and expressing disgust over Reddit giving him an award for the high volume of moderating duties he carried out (CNN 2012, n.p.). Whitney Phillips gives a more nuanced defence of behaviour like this, arguing that sharing offensive or distasteful content draws on and exaggerates content found in the news media, as trolling “reveals a lot about the surrounding cultural terrain” (Phillips 2015, p. 10). In an article for the *Atlantic*, she claims, “Violentacrez shows us, purposefully or not, the underlying values of the host culture” (Phillips 2012, n.p.).

Perhaps part of the reason why Violentacrez’ doxing caught the attention of the news media was because he fit the idea of a troll as an anonymous person who posted deliberately antagonising content: Tama Leaver argues that trolling and anonymity are often tied together (2013). Violentacrez explained his posts in his CNN interview by saying:

There are hot-button topics that you can make a comment about and just enrage people ... I liked going in there and making people really mad over what amounted to meaningless things (Brutsch in CNN 2012, n.p.).

For Milner (2013), Violentacrez’ kind of trolling was characterised as abusive, antagonistic, and counterproductive to public discourse – but it also had productive dimensions. After the Creepshots subreddit was banned, CandidFashionPolice opened, hosting many of the same kinds of posts and continuing to objectify women, but now in an ironic frame. Milner suggests that with a balance of irony and earnestness, trolling could be a vibrant way to engage in public discourse. Milne (2010) calls flaming a vitriolic, aggressive form of online communication, and argues that understanding flaming as a kind of post that always needs to be managed and policed in an effort to facilitate effective communication does not allow any scope for exploring the productive or creative capacity of flaming within group and individual identity formation. Trolling can be productive, as McCosker and Amelia Johns (2013) argue in their study of YouTube comments. They argue vitriol intensifies and sustains forms of civic engagement, a point McCosker (2014) expands on when he reframes trolling as a form of provocation that vitalises online participation.



Violentacrez' posts and subreddits did not just enrage, but sparked interactions and feedback in the form of votes, comments, further circulation of his images, and similar subreddits being created to take the place of the ones Reddit shut down, like CandidFashionPolice. The only reaction bigger than the response to Violentacrez' posts was the response to him being doxed. Anderson Cooper, host of the CNN program that interviewed Violentacrez, claimed while introducing the segment that "a really good troll helps drive traffic on a website" (CNN 2012, n.p.). Leaver (2013) claims that trolling is online provocation for the sake of a reaction, and uses Wilson's term to describe journalists who court controversy: "trollumnists". Since Chen's article doxing Violentacrez sparked so many conversations about identity, anonymity, and pseudonymity on social media, perhaps this makes him a particularly successful troll. As Phillips argues, trolls reveal the boundary, or its absence, between trolling and sensationalist corporate media: "For trolls, exploitation is a leisure activity. For corporate media, it's a business strategy" (Phillips 2015, p. 8).

Although Chen later warned that doxing someone should always be performed after giving the matter serious thought, he has never regretted doxing Violentacrez. On Twitter, he declared, "Anonymity should be valued mainly to the extent it helps protect powerless from powerful. VA wasn't that" (Chen 2012c, n.p.). Chen defends his article doxing Violentacrez by suggesting that the mechanisms of doxing are part of journalism: "I didn't see what I was doing as any different than what investigative journalists have done forever, which is learn sensitive facts and publicize them" (Chen 2012b, n.p.). The purpose of publishing sensitive information is traditionally to hold the powerful accountable. In Jericho's book on Australian political blogs, he argues that blogs and social media are beginning to be thought of as part of the fifth estate, because there is an assumption that blogs monitor the media as the media are believed to monitor the first three estates: the church, the nobility and the townsmen, or commoners (Jericho 2012). Chen's doxing reveals his assumption that Violentacrez deserved to be held to the same level of scrutiny and accountability as a powerful public figure. However, doxing and shaming can disproportionately punish people who would otherwise have limited reach and influence with their social media posts.

Emphasising Violentacrez as an individual often meant portraying him as someone with a high degree of socioeconomic and cultural power, which tended to attribute him responsibility for his actions, and therefore demonise him for victimising and intimidating those less powerful. Those who didn't agree with the doxing use language

to portray Violentacrez as just one expression of a culture, the ‘wolves’ or the ‘mob’ that has an appetite for violent, misogynistic content, making him seem like the victim of this culture, and of a social media culture that targets outspoken people. Whether Violentacrez’ doxing was justified or not, his particular case has elevated the strategy of doxing, as well as the term itself, into something well known. In the news and blog coverage of Grog, the word ‘doxing’ was seldom used to describe his personal details being published in a national newspaper – most publications called it ‘unmasking’ or ‘outing’ instead. But in coverage of Violentacrez, ‘doxing’ was most commonly used. Jeong (2015) sees the term ‘doxing’ as tightly correlated with Chen’s article. It seems that Violentacrez’ doxing has given the term, and the tactic, prominence.

After understanding the reasons for either agreeing or disagreeing with the doxings, this led me to consider what was really at stake when social media pseudonymity is disrupted. By examining how social media platforms deploy the rhetoric of connection to encourage the disclosure of personal information, I propose that forced connections occur when people and platforms publicly link someone to information they wished to keep private.

### **Forced connections: Using social media to reveal information**

Social media platforms operate on the assumption that connections are always desirable and valuable. Many prominent social media platforms are explicitly designed to foster connections. “Google+ is a place to connect with friends and family”, claims Google+’s homepage, and Facebook implores people to sign up so they can “connect with friends, family and other people you know”. Facebook asks people if they want to tag themselves and others in photos, creating what Tufekci (2008) calls a searchable digital trail of social activities; and Twitter draws on algorithmic connections to recommend new accounts in a ‘who to follow’ tab. These algorithmic connections can lead to what Michele Willson (2017) calls unlikely or unintended relationships, like automated calendar reminders or recommendations to people based on preferences and practices. These links can push unwanted associations, such as people who buy digital scales on Amazon for measuring cooking ingredients being presented with drug paraphernalia (Knibbs 2014b). A rich field of work has developed around the notion of social media connections and networks: books like *Personal connections in the digital age* (Baym 2010), *A*

*networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites* (Papacharissi 2011), and *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media* (van Dijck 2013b) emphasise connectivity as a core tenet of social media.

According to Baym, there exists within media studies an enduring fascination with connection:

The discourses around technology and the findings of research into its use and consequences tell us that, millennia after the inventions of the first communication technologies, we remain oriented towards preserving the authenticity of human connection (Baym 2010, p. 155).

van Dijck (2013b) argues that ‘social media’ should be renamed ‘connective media’, because this term emphasises how platforms engineer and manipulate connections. She argues that the meaning of ‘social’ encompasses both human connectedness and automated connectivity, and that platforms work to stress the human aspects of connection while downplaying the way connections are turned into data and automated through algorithms. Identity facets are often reduced to data points, a process that quantifies and commodifies affect through social buttons, behind which lies an infrastructure that connects these metrics (Gerlitz & Helmond 2013). Translating identity information into data makes it easier to connect together. In the case of doxing, data combines with human effort to force connections between otherwise disparate forms of information.

Another case of an investigative journalist revealing someone’s real name against their will involves the pseudonymous author Elena Ferrante being unmasked, not because her books contain violent, racist, offensive content like Violentacrez’ subreddits, or because she was influencing national politics like Grog. Instead, the journalist Claudio Gatti (2016) claims publishing Ferrante’s real name in the *New York Review* was necessary to gain an insight into her novels. This prompted an outcry from the literary community, who called the unmasking a violation, claiming that Gatti “exercised his own perceived right to put Ferrante back where he can keep an eye on her. It is a terrible and ghastly violation” (Orr 2016, n.p.). Within the furor, similar discourses to those of my two case studies circulated around public interest in identities, the right to

uncover private information, and the damage this can do. Here, Jeanette Winterson comments on how unmasking functions as a silencing tactic:

The stripping and parading of Elena Ferrante is violent and crude. Creatively it might destroy her (she has said she cannot write without anonymity), so it is a deliberately malicious act, too (Winterson 2016, n.p.).

Some journalists, in documenting the scandal, refused to call Ferrante by her doxed name, as a gesture of respect for her and a condemnation of the unmasking: “Elena Ferrante is really Elena Ferrante” (Orr 2016, n.p.); “I go on calling Elena Ferrante Elena Ferrante because that is who she wishes to be” (Winterson 2016, n.p.). The journalist Nilanjana Roy (2016) argues that Ferrante was successful at splitting her authorial pseudonym from her personal self until she was doxed, and she will now be unwillingly pulled into online searches about her and her novels, changing the way she exists online:

Soon, you will not be able to search for ‘Elena Ferrante’ without the other surfacing, the real-life author chained to the pseudonym. It is no longer possible to go back to not knowing (Roy 2016, n.p.).

In his 2014 book *Disconnecting with social networking sites*, Light begins with Zuckerberg’s claim that connection should be valued above anything else. Light muses, “is there a need for everyone to be connected 24/7? ... In practice, connection does not always play out” (Light 2014, p. 3). He identifies that academic work around communities and networks emphasises connectivity, such as Castells’ work on connections as key organising structures of our societies. Light believes connection has been overemphasised in research on social media, referring to boyd and Ellison’s (2007) definition of social networking sites as publicly displaying lists of people who are connected to one another. His book introduces the importance of theorising social media in terms of disconnective practice, or how people disengage with the connective

affordances of social media, like untagging photos, unfriending, or manually relocating content by cutting and pasting URLs instead of clicking share buttons.

While Cassidy (2016) investigates how people disconnect from certain parts of platforms they don't agree with or like through demonstrating their participatory reluctance, Bollmer (2016) sees disconnection as a punishment. He argues the norms of digital citizenship are enforced through the threat of disconnection, which revokes status and agency. For Bollmer, "a world of networks is a world in which human beings do not matter unless they connect, flow, and communicate, becoming subjects that behave like the technologies they use" (Bollmer 2016, p. 175). But he cautions that people never act like perfect conductors of connectivity, even when an inability to connect a person with data indicates that someone is an unruly subject that must be disciplined or excluded.

But not all connections are valuable or desirable: forced connections can embarrass or even harm someone. For example, a psychiatrist found that Facebook had begun recommending her patients to her as potential friends through the algorithm that assumes connections from phone and email contacts. This was an enormous breach of confidentiality – some of her patients saw familiar people on their own list of recommended friends and realised they must be seeing the same psychiatrist (Hill 2016). This is an example of the kind of automated connection that Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker (2007) compare to computer viruses, arguing that "they are not networks that are somehow broken but *networks that work too well*" (Galloway & Thacker 2007, p. 6; emphasis original).

Although this chapter pays particular attention to doxing – the forced connections made by people as a deliberate strategy to harm someone – automated connections are also made by platforms, algorithms, and search engines. Facebook compiles shadow profiles, which contain data that people have not knowingly shared with the platform but nonetheless has become available to others, such as recording your phone number when a friend gives permission for Facebook to access their phone contacts (Gowans 2016). As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Google has begun compiling profiles of people and their online activity (Angwin 2016). Thanks to our rare surname, a tweet I sent containing my sister's first name now appears in Google searches for her, linking this information in an unintended way.

Grog's and Violentacrez' names, occupations, and cities of residence were revealed in their doxings – but, as a corollary, details about their wives and children were also made

public, including photographs.<sup>11</sup> Doxing these men tarnished both their reputations, and their names now yield information about their doxings when typed into a search engine. For Grog, one forced connection in particular highlights the importance of pseudonymity in keeping other people in someone's life away from unwanted scrutiny. As a critic of the media coverage of the Australian government's disability policies, Grog's frustration with the poor coverage of a policy decision for disability funding prompted him to write that 95 per cent of the journalists covering politics "can go home. You are, as they say in the army, a waste of rations" (Jericho 2010a, n.p.). In the same post, Grog notes that he has a vested interest in disability policy: his daughter has Down syndrome, and his wife teaches a primary school student who is struggling with his reading (Jericho 2010a). He disclosed these personal details about his family, and about his wife's student, pseudonymously. Without knowing who the post is from, the message that there is inadequate information about disability policy comes through clearly, illustrated by personal anecdotes that reveal the extent of the issue. When Grog was doxed, a forced connection was made between himself and his daughter that has compromised her online identity too – knowing the surname and disability of this girl is an unnecessary detail that makes her more vulnerable to being discovered online. Forcing connections on social media can do serious damage, which is one reason why doxing is such a threat.

### **How masks help us understand pseudonyms**

Newell (2013) argues that unmasking does not expose or diminish mystery; it extends it. When someone is doxed, something already known is revealed: that there is a person out there, blogging about politics or curating collections of violent or sexual images. This kind of content does not appear by itself from a blogging site or bulletin board; it is a response to a culture of commercial media being positioned as an opposition to social media. Grog's Gamut was born out of frustration with political reporting in Australia; Violentacrez' posts were fuelled by the audience sensing that he was presenting images restricted or forbidden by traditional media. Their pseudonyms acted as masks because they signalled that these people were not acting in their capacity as professionals, and the unmasking, the "cut" as Taussig (1999, p. 3) puts it, is that they were not

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<sup>11</sup> See Bates 2012 and Anghel 2012 for examples of news articles with a photograph of Violentacrez with his wife.

professionals after all. Taussig explains that there is power in secrecy, but to have power, other people must know there is a secret. Pseudonyms carry power, as they convey that someone has a secret. When someone is doxed, the individual is located not only by their name, face, and location, but also within their social status. As Donath (2014) argues, an identity that is based in a network clearly situates a person in their social position. In both cases, it is striking that the person who was doxed is just who was expected, given the demographics of Reddit and Blogger. Taussig describes a public secret as that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated – especially in the case of Violentacrez, is it any wonder that the person reappropriating indecent photographs of women was revealed to be representative of Reddit’s core demographic? Doxed, Violentacrez lost the power of his pseudonym, and bore the outrage of the public, as well as losing his job.

The doxings, in 2010 and 2012, occurred at a point when attitudes about online anonymity were in flux as social media was growing. After being doxed, Grog quit his job as a public servant to become a researcher for the ABC program *The Hamster Wheel*, before writing *The rise of the fifth estate* (2012), then becoming a writer for the newspaper *The Guardian Australia*. Violentacrez, aside from being brought up as an example in articles asking whether journalists have the right to expose trolls (Sillesen 2015) or declaring online anonymity to be harmful because it “empowers people to traffic in vile and venomous abuse” (Schaller 2015, n.p.), has not made any public posts since he posted his resume under the subreddit For Hire, citing his experience “building and maintaining adult communities” (mbrutsch 2012b, n.p.) as an employable attribute.

Despite the ensuing discussions, which generally disapproved of doxing as a retaliation technique, unmasking and doxing only intensified in the following years. In 2015, Reddit updated its harassment policy to warn against people engaging in systematic actions that made others feel unsafe, including posting their personal information (Reddit admins 2015c). Unmasking and doxing are becoming more pervasive, argues journalist Arthur Chu (2015), as the ‘new normal’ online is living with the idea that, at any moment, anyone could be doxed and shamed. Chu does not trust media gatekeepers, much like the journalists who performed both doxings, and is pleased they have ‘lost control of the script’ – but he does not automatically trust the instincts of the ‘mob’, either, as they can be irrational. It would be a different story, he argues, if those most deserving of public outrage were the ones who had to face it. Instead, doxing becomes a

way for individuals to police and expose other individuals who are seen to be in violation of cultural norms, punishing them by taking away the identity they chose.

## Conclusion

Masks and pseudonyms work in similar ways: allowing people to exaggerate some facets of their identity, while downplaying others. The mask Violentacrez chose amplified the voyeuristic aspects of his personality, which he emphasised on Reddit by posting graphic content and boasting about his sexual exploits. Grog's mask let him comment on national politics without revealing personal details about his family that would have made him seem biased. Both pseudonyms allowed these men to express aspects of their identity to suit the context, as a response to the datafied, recorded nature of the platforms they were using. The mask of the pseudonym allowed them to contextualise their communication, rather than submitting to the idea that everything said online would be linked to their name.

When doxing becomes a punishment for people who provoke the ire of those powerful enough to out them, like journalists, this has the potential to limit participation from pseudonymous people. As Dash claims, "the same mechanism is responsible both for holding people in power accountable and for keeping marginalized people from asserting themselves" (Dash in Dewey 2014, n.p.). In *Wired*, boyd writes about what she calls the "real moral of the Gawker/Reddit story": that doxing is used by trolls to target people, and used by people to out trolls. She argues that new technology brings about destabilisation, which allows us as a society to "interrogate our collective commitments" (boyd 2012c, n.p.).

Doxing as a punishment reveals just how important pseudonymity is, especially in the case of Violentacrez, when so many online commentators thought it was the right thing to do. Chen's intention in doxing Violentacrez was to humiliate him and strip him of power, which was achieved in his subsequent firing as well as becoming the recipient of much online outrage and abuse. Part of using social media involves submitting to the idea that once content is uploaded, it will not necessarily remain under the control of the person who put it there. Doxing of online content producers does much more harm than good, especially when considering how much the journalists and platforms performing doxings benefit through attention measured in hits and links and, increasingly, likes



and shares, in order to be commodified (Gerlitz & Helmond 2013). The spectacle of a journalist with institutional power shaming a person producing social media content is likely to drive traffic towards the news site that features the article about doxing.

Examination of masks and doxing has revealed that there is power in masking or using a pseudonym, as these practices allow a person to choose what to communicate about themselves. Equally, unmasking and doxing are assertions of power over someone. Doxing forces connections between identity facets that a person has deliberately kept separate. This chapter has focused specifically on journalists releasing personal information about social media content producers in order to silence them. Other contexts in which doxing has emerged as a tactic to harm pseudonymous people include the collective Anonymous doxing the member who claimed Anonymous was initiating an attack on Facebook, drawing a boundary between which actions Anonymous was responsible for (Dobusch & Schoeneborn 2015); camgirls – women who engage in sex work mediated by screens – having their performances secretly recorded and distributed accompanied by personal information (Jones 2015); women within the games industry being doxed as a misogynistic gatekeeping strategy to intimidate women away from participating (Jane 2016); and feminists appropriating doxing as a tactic to shame racists and misogynists, even though they are still as susceptible to abusing power as the groups they fight against (Oluo 2015). These alternative framings of doxing still hinge on the rights of people to remain pseudonymous, and the harm in forcing connections. The decisions that matter about what to disclose and what identity to present online are not simply between an individual and a platform, but sprawl out to everyone who owns, uses, and features on platforms across the internet. Understanding what the stakes are, and how personal information can be used against someone, leads to a deeper understanding of a social media environment that has the capacity to express many different facets of identities.

I now present the conclusion of this thesis, which draws together my findings and offers some potential avenues for future research.

# CONCLUSION

## Towards an understanding of social media pseudonymity

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This thesis offers a critical examination of the way names work on social media in order to better understand social media pseudonymity. As social media use increases, so do the connections between people and information that exist on these platforms. Within the real-name web, pseudonymity remains a key way of establishing and navigating contexts and connections. Increasingly complex identity work is necessary in order to manage the presentation of the self across multiple platforms.

This makes investigation into different aspects of pseudonymity imperative, especially the relationships between platform affordances that encourage certain kinds of identity expressions; individual practices of pseudonymity as people decide what aspects of themselves to reveal and conceal; and the potential for pseudonymity to be disrupted through forced connections made by automated systems, algorithms, and other people in networks. Therefore, this research project has first canvassed the development of pseudonymity, from the printing press to online communication platforms to the real-name web, before presenting three case studies that each take a different approach to examining social media pseudonymity: affordances, practices, and disruptions. Hogan (2013) discusses pseudonyms as a contested, yet still vital, part of the real-name web, and the nymwars and Violentacrez' doxing have both garnered academic attention. But nobody yet has drawn these cases together with others to argue for a reconceptualisation of anonymity – meaning 'no name' – as pseudonymity – meaning 'false name' – to interrogate how the names people choose for themselves are powerful ways to assert identity, as well as strategically contextualising communication by connecting and disconnecting aspects of identity.

My interest in studying social media pseudonymity first came from noticing how much academic attention had already been paid to how online identities are created and managed, as well as a desire to discover how people contend with collapsed contexts and imagined audiences when engaging with different platforms. I have been inspired by Poole's concept of identity as prismatic, and his plea to platform designers to understand that "it's not who you share with, it's who you share as" (Poole 2013, n.p.). Growing up

as the internet became a household technology in Australia in the 1990s and 2000s, my own expressions of identity have developed from temporary pseudonymous chat-room handles, to a Hotmail account I used to email schoolfriends, after-school chats on MSN Messenger, a lavishly decorated MySpace page, a Facebook profile to keep in touch with friends on leaving high school, and an originally pseudonymous Twitter account which gradually became more public as I followed people who already knew me. I changed my Twitter username to @emvdm during my PhD because a username derived from my own name was short and recognisable, but also because researching online identities has prompted constant reflection on my own self-presentation on social media.

The purpose of this conclusion is to draw the major themes of this thesis together and to make suggestions for future research.

## **Findings**

The introduction of this thesis articulated the proposition: that what people call anonymity must be rethought as pseudonymity, which is identity work made up of practices that negotiate platform affordances and networked disruptions. I canvassed current scholarship around names on social media, and the different types of pseudonymity, in order to establish the parameters for the research project.

Part 1 of the thesis, Historical and contemporary forms of pseudonymity, began with Chapter 1, Pseudonymity history: Authorship, the author-function, and what authors mean for digital texts. I have explored the origins of the term 'pseudonymity', and found it has always been linked with how authors and texts are thought of, by mapping out the history of pseudonymity, locating the printing press as key technology within the development of the concept of the author. Using Foucault's work on the author-function, I have argued that authorship, and therefore pseudonymity, depend on contextual factors in the process of producing and distributing texts, not simply the question of including or leaving out a name on the work. I have asserted the importance of contextual factors in understanding the meaning and reception of texts, and argued that while the internet has prompted reconsiderations of authorship, it is of enduring importance online.

Turning to how online names have become essential identity information since the World Wide Web became a domestic technology, Chapter 2, *Identity work from usernames to profiles*: The development of social media pseudonymity, has given a history of social media through the lens of Goffman's theories of self as a performance, and identity work. I have considered the role pseudonymity has played in social media as an emerging form of networked communication, from Unix logins to bulletin boards to chat rooms to social networking. In doing so, I emphasise how each platform has become a site for complex, multifaceted identity work and pseudonymity practices. As the web's capabilities have expanded to include networked profiles and multimedia content, people have remained invested in the way they present themselves to others when using platforms to communicate. The naming options afforded to people using social media set up the dynamic between the platform and the person, and go on to affect the kinds of communication that take place on the site.

Chapter 3, *Web 2.0 and the real-name web*, has investigated some of the commercial imperatives behind translating social media communication into data. Real names benefit platform owners, as they help finesse the data collections they own and sell in order to profit from the immaterial labour provided by their members. While the real-name web entrenches the expectation that people will use their real names in their social media profiles, pseudonyms remain a key practice. Pseudonymity becomes a way to claim agency over people's social media identities, whether they thwart Facebook's real-name policy or turn to a pseudonymous platform.

Part 2, *Case studies of pseudonymity affordances, practices, and disruptions*, has moved from broad to specific understandings of social media pseudonymity. Each of the case studies takes a different approach to studying social media pseudonymity in order to highlight that pseudonymity is not as simple as typing a chosen name into a box, but the result of a confluence of platform affordances, individual practices, and networked connections – elements that are often complex and contested.

Chapter 4, *Pseudonymity affordances: People and platforms clash over identity politics in the 2011 nymwars*, sees the value of an affordance approach to names on social media. This chapter shows that during the nymwars, Google+ and Facebook pushed for a fundamentally misunderstood model of identity that harms people for whom a real name is not an appropriate way to represent themselves on social media. I have explored how platform affordances encourage certain forms of engagement with the

platform, while being contested within and outside of the platform by those who take issue with the options presented. This chapter has demonstrated that the nymwars were a moment when people asserted their right to be pseudonymous on social media.

Platforms were slow to respond to the nymwars, with Google+ taking years to change its stance on real names and Facebook relaxing, but not abolishing, its real-name policy in 2015. This chapter has stressed that platforms are commercial entities that overlook the difficulties of enforcing a real-name policy, highlighting that many groups find pseudonymity especially important, including women, queer people, survivors of abuse, sex workers, whistleblowers, and political dissidents.

Shifting focus to the way people enact pseudonymous identities on another platform, Chapter 5, Pseudonymity practices: Faceless bodies on Reddit Gonewild, has examined pseudonymity practices, or how people enact pseudonymity by strategically revealing and concealing names, faces, and identity information in sexualised self-portrait photographs in a playful, seductive portrayal of mediated intimacy. This chapter has demonstrated that people use Reddit Gonewild with a conscious appreciation for how platforms are networked, and how they present various aspects of themselves to this specific space accordingly. Most – but not all – of the people who post to Gonewild choose to be pseudonymous for the purpose of sexual play. But choosing to be pseudonymous is not always enough to ensure someone remains so.

Chapter 6, Pseudonymity disrupted: Making forced connections through doxing, has investigated what happens when someone is doxed, exposing the fragility of the pseudonym, and the politics of forcing connections between a person and their personal information against their will. This chapter views doxing as a disruption to pseudonymity, seeing pseudonyms as masks that offer people agency over their various identity facets, masks which can be ruptured by forcing connections between datafied personal information in a bid to punish someone for their social media posts or identity. I have performed a content analysis of news and blog opinions of two separate doxings, arguing that when information from social media is linked with other facets of the self, it takes control over someone's personal information away from them.

This thesis has charted pseudonymity's development from a matter of authors using different names for their texts after the rise of the printing press in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to a strategy that allows people to control and contextualise their communication on social media. Pseudonymity not only conceals names, it reveals that

identity is neither fixed nor stable, that not everyone is safe when they use their legal name, that those who develop social media platforms do so from a position of privilege and often exclude those who are more vulnerable, and that being pseudonymous pushes back against platforms that aim to make people quantified and commodified by selling their personal information to advertisers.

Being pseudonymous on social media involves negotiating with the people one already knows, such as friends, family, and colleagues, as well as people one has the potential to know, including friends of friends and future employees. But pseudonymity also involves contending with the automated processes that lie behind a social media network of people: algorithms, data collection mechanisms, search engine logics. For example, using a pseudonym to post naked photos on Reddit means these images will not be returned by a Google search of a first and last name. These social and technological aspects of pseudonymity are intertwined.

Automated processes operate with the goal of making connections to others using the same platform, and can make pseudonymity a challenge. On Facebook, even when someone thwarts its real-name policy by using a pseudonym, if they have linked their Facebook account to their Gmail address it will suggest people they are emailing as recommended friends. A profile photograph can be searched on Google Images to discover where else on the web that image occurs. Having profile information from Facebook posted on Reddit can mean the Facebook profile is suspended until suitable identification is provided to confirm the person operating the account. In these ways, making connections with networked people can lead to forced connections with others, and with identity information.

Social media logics assume that connection is always desirable and always a goal, while social media scholars suggest that not all connections are equal. I argue that not all connections are desirable to publicise or feature on social media, and that making forced connections violates expectations of social media use. Being pseudonymous in a culture of real names shows an understanding of social media platforms. It resists data collection and automation by corporate platforms through providing information that cannot be connected with other identity facets, thereby contextualising communication. Social media pseudonymity responds to platforms that make, formalise, and flatten connections by assuming all relationships in a person's life carry the same weight.

## Ethics

This thesis has offered a sustained account of how to treat participants in social media research with respect to their anonymity. I have discussed ethics throughout this thesis, and I now draw together these threads to emphasise the value of giving research participants control over their identity when their contributions are used for research.

In carrying out this research project, I have striven to apply what I have discovered about pseudonyms when approaching research participants and collecting social media posts to use as data. The boundaries between public and private social media content can be difficult to determine (Markham & Buchanan 2012), and should be treated with care. I have drawn from a wide range of sources to present evidence for this thesis, some of which have been social media posts without a clear indication of how public they are. These sources include tweets, biography statements on Twitter, archives of IRC conversations, comments on AskReddit threads, image titles on Reddit Gonewild posts, and deleted Reddit posts. People on Twitter, IRC, and Reddit are not likely to include a researcher as part of their imagined audience (Litt 2012; Litt & Hargittai 2016), but these are texts that are publicly accessible without logging in to any platform. When I quoted social media posts, I made decisions based on their individual context to either credit the person who created the post or content, as I did for McMinn, the “proud author of several emails”, or anonymise their contribution, as for the Redditors who posted responses to an AskReddit thread.

In both the surveys, which involved informed consent, I offered my participants the choice of how they would like to be represented: I gave a blank box to fill out under ‘my name or pseudonym is’ with an additional option to remain anonymous if they preferred, in which case I assigned them a participant number to use instead of a name. This is important because I believe it helped gain the trust of participants, and let them know I took their personal information seriously. I also discovered that giving people open-ended ways to express themselves and their identity yields unintended but fascinating results. Instead of only providing a selection between ‘male’ or ‘female’ for participants to tick, when surveying people who posted to Reddit Gonewild I asked the question, “what is your gender identity?” with a blank box. Although most participants wrote ‘male’ or ‘female’ in the box, other responses include ‘cis female’, ‘woman (cis)’, ‘female, born female’, ‘cis male’, ‘genderfluid’, and ‘female, mostly, but I like presenting as

masculine sometimes'. These results show me that I was engaging with a group of people who are not only highly digitally literate in terms of using the Gonewild subreddit, but are aware of emerging sociopolitical shifts around how gender identities are discussed. Although the relation between gender and pseudonymity was not thoroughly explored in this thesis, it could be a productive avenue for future work.

### **Limitations and future research**

This thesis has focused predominantly on a few platforms: Reddit, Google+, Facebook, and Twitter, and in presenting three specific case studies, it is necessarily limited in scope. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the context of the research is social media platforms that are commercially and culturally successful in Melbourne, Australia. Further research could broaden this focus, by seeking out participants or collaborating with researchers from different backgrounds and contexts.

My thesis raises broader questions concerning social media and identity work, especially around the topics of platform design, online harassment, and the digital divide. I now explore each of these potential questions for future research in turn.

#### **First, what features would a platform designed for multifaceted identities incorporate?**

As Poole argues, identity is prismatic: "You can look at people from any angle and see something totally different ... there's not a single service online that allows for this" (Poole 2013, n.p.). Google+ offers groups called 'circles' to post to, which addresses some aspects of context collapse, but people have to present a singular identity to each of these groups. On Facebook Messenger, people can choose a different name in each conversation. Imzy lets people toggle between different names or pseudonyms for each post. A deeper understanding of pseudonymity and multifaceted identities might look like a more granulated version of these moves, such that people could more effectively compartmentalise connections, and present a different name and photo to each, so friends could see a nickname and a group photo, colleagues could be presented with a professional photo and a work email address, and a partner could see a photo of the couple together. Involving platform owners and designers in future research would add insights from the people who profit from these platforms. As Gillespie (2017) raises, reconciling freedom of speech, community values, individual safety, aspirations of art,



and commercial imperatives is an enormous undertaking, part of which must include reconsidering the responsibilities of platforms.

**Second, how does an understanding of pseudonymity as complex and multifaceted allow us to discuss social media trolling and abuse, especially gendered harassment?** Although it has not been a main goal of this thesis to find ways to combat social media trolling and harassment, these issues have emerged over the course of the research project. Harassment has been established as a gendered phenomenon. Most trolls are men (Grigoriadis 2011; Phillips 2012) or at least performing maleness (Phillips 2015), while most victims of harassment are women (Citron 2014; Shaw 2013; Taylor 2014) or use names that appear feminine (Hauben & Hauben 1997). The popular view of anonymity concedes that it leads to, or is at least partly responsible for, trolling, abuse, and harassment. Kashmir Hill (2012) claims there is a view that the internet is like Dr Jekyll's serum, transforming mild-mannered geeks into monsters, and Lance Ulanoff (2015) exemplifies this rhetoric when he argues that until online anonymity is eradicated, trolls will win.

But this thesis has disputed such a straightforward connection, drawing from: research that suggests getting rid of anonymity and pseudonymity will not solve harassment (Citron 2014; Coleman 2014b); studies that argue group norms on social media platforms have a stronger effect on aggression and abuse than anonymity (Rösner & Krämer 2016; Spears & Postmes 2015); and my own research participants, who note that avoiding harassment from others was a major factor in their own pseudonymity. Future work in this area should understand the importance of pseudonyms to people while it investigates platform responsibility and moderation. Astra Taylor claims that if equality is something valuable, platforms must hold it at their core:

No doubt, some will find the idea of engineering platforms to promote diversity or adapting laws to curb online harassment unsettling and paternalistic, but such criticism ignores the ways online spaces are already contrived with specific outcomes in mind (Taylor 2014, p. 139).

Dash pushes for platforms to take more responsibility for the harassment that takes place on them, urging stronger moderation because “we are accountable for the

communities we create” (Dash 2016, n.p.). Instead of focusing future discussions of social media harassment and abuse on the names people use, a nuanced understanding of pseudonymity would allow attention to be directed towards platform design, regulation, moderation, and audiences, each of which cultivates platform norms that have the potential to be permissive of harassment.

**Third, how does the digital divide, including varying levels of technology access and digital literacy, impact the avenues available for identity work on social media?** In discussing people who use social media, this leaves out many people who do not use these services, or even the internet, at all. There are plenty of studies on internet non-use and resistance to social media.<sup>12</sup> The digital divide<sup>13</sup> still exists, and issues like class, race, and gender make for complex relationships with networked communication. Scott Ewing (2016) reminds us that not everyone is on the internet: 15 per cent of Australians did not use the internet in 2015, leaving 3.6 million out of Australia’s population of 24 million people offline. Future work will contribute further to the emerging field of social media studies.

When we arrive at a social media platform, we carry with us all the ways in which we construct our identity: as gendered, raced, sexed beings located within cultures, nations, groups, communities, and societies. We draw on all the ways in which we are identified, by ourselves and by others, and we prepare to contend with how these identifications stack up against the affordances the platform offers, the identity practices we choose to engage in, and the potential for others in our network to challenge and disrupt this identity work, as we approach the screen, and enter into the box our name.

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<sup>12</sup> For scholarship on non-use of the internet and social media, see Cassidy 2016; Hargittai 2007; Morris, Goodman & Brading 2007; Portwood-Stacer 2012; Selwyn, Gorard & Furlong 2005; and Ting 2016.

<sup>13</sup> For scholarship on the digital divide, see Ragnedda & Muschert 2013; Rennie et al. 2016; van Dijk & Hacker 2003; and Warschauer 2004.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Guide to social media platforms mentioned in thesis

Site	Year launched	Country of origin	Description	Tagline
11Beep	2014	Nepal	App for self-destructing anonymous messages	“A mobile social network”
4chan	2003	New York, US	Anonymous bulletin board	“a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images”
America Online Instant Messaging	1988	New York, US	Chat program	“Free text messaging”
ASKfm	2010	Riga, Latvia	Question and answer platform	“Ask and answer”
Blogger	1999	San Francisco, US	Blog platform	“Create a unique and beautiful blog. It’s easy and free”
Chatroulette	2009	Russia	Pairs strangers randomly for video chat	“Chatroulette is a place where you can interact with new people over text-chat, webcam and mic”
Cloaq	2014	Unknown	Assigns people identification numbers instead of usernames	“Speak your mind”
Confide	2014	New York, US	App for self-destructing anonymous messages	“Your confidential messenger”
Cyworld	1999	South Korea	Social networking	–
Diaspora	2010	New York, US	Distributed social networking	“The online social world where you are in control”
Ello	2014	US	Social networking	“The Creators Network – Visibility. Influence. Opportunity”

Facebook	2004	Cambridge, US	Social networking	“Connect with friends, family and other people you know”
Formspring	2009	California, US	Question and answer platform	“The best way to meet people, express yourself and expand your life”
Friendster	2002	Canada	Social networking	—
Google+	2011	US	Social networking	“Social network that aims to make sharing on the web more like sharing in real life”
Imzy	2015	Salt Lake City, US	Bulletin board	“Experience community and find where you belong”
Internet Relay Chat	1988	Finland	Chatroom	—
KakaoTalk	2010	South Korea	Instant messaging	“A fast and multifaceted messaging app”
KakaoStory	2012	South Korea	Mobile photo sharing	“Share the stories of your day on KakaoStory”
LinkedIn	2003	California, US	Professional networking	“World’s Largest Professional Network”
MSN Messenger	1999	Washington, US	Chat program for text-based chatting with people added to a friends list	—
MySpace	2003	California, US	Social networking	“A place for friends”
Omegle	2009	Vermont, US	Randomly pairs anonymous strangers for a text-based conversation	“Talk to strangers”
Popcorn Messaging	2013	California, US	Sends anonymous messages to people nearby	“Privately chat with others within 1 mile”
Rayzit	2014	Cyprus	Sends anonymous messages to people nearby	“Rayz Your Message”
Reddit	2005	California, US	Bulletin board	“The front page of the internet”
Renren	2005	Beijing, China	Social networking	—
Secret	2014	California, US	Overlays text onto images and sends it out to a network	“Be yourself”

			with the username disguised	
Sina Weibo	2009	China	Microblogging	“Discover new things anytime, anywhere”
Six Degrees	1997	New York, US	Social networking	“The web’s hottest new social network”
Snapchat	2011	California, US	Sends to friends photos and text-based messages that self-destruct after 10 seconds	“Life’s more fun when you live in the moment!”
Sneaky	2014	New York, US	Sends anonymous photos over the mobile phone network	“Send anonymous photos directly to your friends”
Spraffl	2013	Edinburgh, Scotland	Sends anonymous messages to people nearby	“The Revolution will not be personalized”
Tencent QQ	1999	China	Instant messaging	–
Twitter	2006	California, US	Microblogging	“It’s what’s happening”
Usenet	1980	Duke University, Durham, US	Non-centralised computer network for discussion and file sharing	–
Vkontakte	2006	Saint Petersburg, Russia	Social networking	–
Whisper	2012	California, US	Sends text-based messages out to a network pseudonymously	“The best place to discover secrets around you”
Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link	1985	California, US	Bulletin board	“Welcome to a gathering that's like no other”
Yik Yak	2013	Atlanta, US	Sends pseudonymous messages out to a location-based network	“Find your herd”
YouTube	2005	California, US	Video sharing platform	“Broadcast Yourself”

## Appendix B: Ethics application

# Swinburne

## Human Research Ethics

### Application Form



This form is to be completed in conjunction with the Guide to Completing the Swinburne Human Research Ethics Application Form and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

<b>Project Title</b>	Social media pseudonymity
<b>CI name and title</b>	Associate Professor Esther Milne

### Section 1: Level of Risk

If a project is of low or negligible risk then ordinarily it can be submitted for sub-committee review. Low risk research is defined in the *National Statement* as: Research in which the only foreseeable risk is one of discomfort. Research in which the risk for participants is more serious than discomfort is not low risk.

1.1.	Do any of the below apply to your project?	Yes	No
1.1.1	Research only being conducted for purposes of quality assurance for internal Swinburne purposes only and there will not be any publications, presentations or other such research outcomes. Non-identifiable information only being used or accessed. If yes, then you do not need ethics approval to proceed. Contact the Ethics Office if you need further clarification of this.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.1.2	Has your project already been reviewed and approved by another HREC? If so, then your project could be eligible for expedited review. Contact the Ethics Office to confirm. You will need to provide: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• a covering letter outlining the Swinburne role in the project;</li><li>• the approval;</li><li>• all documentation provided to attain the approval; and</li><li>• any documentation regarding clarifications etc.</li></ul>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.1.3	Clinical trial or intervention? If yes, then you will need to contact the Ethics Office as you might need to submit your project for approval at a non-Swinburne HREC such as the Alfred Hospital HREC or	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>



	Bellberry. If your project can be reviewed by SUHREC then you will need to complete the NEAF, the Victorian Specific Module and prepare a Study Protocol.		
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Please consult the below list and check any boxes that might apply to your research.

1.2	Does your project involve any of the following categories of research requiring HREC review? <i>NS 5.1.6</i>	Yes	No
1.2.1	Interventions and therapies, including clinical and non-clinical trials and innovations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.2	Human genetics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.3	Human stem cells	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.4	Women who are pregnant and the human foetus	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.5	People highly dependent on care who may be unable to give consent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.6	People with a cognitive impairment, an intellectual disability, or a mental illness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.7	Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Peoples	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.8	People involved in illegal activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.9	Planned deception, covert observation, or active concealment of information	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.10	Collection of identifiable information without permission from person involved	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.11	People in countries that are politically unstable, where human rights are restricted or where research involves economically disadvantaged, exploited or marginalised participants from such countries	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.12	Risk of more than discomfort to participants <i>NS 2.1.6</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.2.13	Does your project access information requiring compliance with Section 95 and 95A of the Privacy Act?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3	Does your project involve any of the following topics?	Yes	No
1.3.1	Any disease or health problem	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.2	Sensitive personal issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.4	Sensitive cultural issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.6	Grief, death or serious/traumatic loss	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.5	Gambling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.6	Any psychological disorder, depression, anxiety or mood states?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.7	Eating disorders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.8	Illicit drug use or substance abuse	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.9	Self-report of criminal behaviour	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.10	Parenting behaviour	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.11	Suicide	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.12	Minors (except where they are 15-17yrs and project involves no more than anonymous questionnaires of non-sensitive nature)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.13	Fertility	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

1.3.14	Termination of pregnancy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.15	Race or ethnic identity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.3.16	Sexuality, sexual behaviour or gender identity	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>1.4</b>	<b>Does your project specifically target participants from any of the following groups?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
1.4.1	People highly dependent on medical care	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.4.2	People not usually considered vulnerable but who may be thought so in the context of the project	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.4.3	People in a dependant or unequal relationship with the researchers (eg lecturer/student, doctor/patient, teacher/pupil, professional/client)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.4.4	People unable to give consent because of difficulties in understanding the Plain Language Statement or Participant Information Statement or the like (eg language difficulties)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.4.6	People whose ability to give consent is impaired	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.4.7	People with a physical disability or vulnerability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.4.8	Residents in a custodial institution	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
1.4.9	Members of a socially identifiable group with a special cultural or religious needs or political vulnerabilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

If you answered yes to any of the above questions then your project will probably need to be reviewed by the full human research ethics committee, the Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC).

If you answered no to all of the above questions then your project could be reviewed by a sub-committee. Please note that if there is anything in the project details that either the Research Office or the reviewing body considers should be reviewed by the full committee then the project will be referred to SUHREC for review.

If you still believe that your project should be reviewed by a sub-committee because of either the nature of the participants or project then provide a brief justification review below.

I have checked the box marked 'Sexuality, sexual behaviour or gender identity' because the nature of the subreddit (topic thread on online bulletin board Reddit) from which I wish to recruit participants is sexual – Reddit Gonewild is an exhibitionist subreddit for people to show off their naked or partially naked bodies.

Gonewild is for adults over the age of 18, and everyone accessing or posting content to the subreddit must agree with the terms and conditions, which include confirming they are over the age of 18 and willing to see adult content.

Reddit Gonewild is of interest to my thesis about social media pseudonymity, because most people posting to the subreddit show off their bodies, but conceal their faces, and post under a pseudonym. While I am asking about negotiations around anonymity and pseudonymity (see Appendix 2b for a full list of questions), responses are likely to address exhibitionist behaviour.

I'll be contacting potential participants through their public Reddit account by sending them a private message. At no stage during data collection, analysis, or publication do I need to know participants' real names. I will not be publishing any identifying information about participants from Reddit Gonewild, nor will I be publishing any images.

The only question concerning gender identity is the short list of demographic information that participants can choose to fill out, which includes a blank space to fill in whatever gender with which they identify.

## Section 2: Administrative Details

### 2.1 Project Title

Social media pseudonymity

### 2.2 Project time frame for activities that require ethics approval

Commencement date	Monday 22 February 2016	Completion date	Monday 19 December 2016
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### 2.3 Chief Investigator details (CI can't be a student)

CI's name and title:	Associate Professor Esther Milne		
Faculty and/or Research Centre/unit:	Faculty of Health, Arts and Design, School of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Media and Communication		
Email:	<a href="mailto:emilne@swin.edu.au">emilne@swin.edu.au</a>	Phone:	9214 8195
Qualifications and research experience relevant to the project:	Esther Milne holds a PhD in Media and Communications. She has extensive research experience in studying online communities which provided the basis for her sole-authored book published with Routledge in 2010 ( <i>Letters, postcards email: technologies of presence</i> ). More recently she has been conducting qualitative research with interviews and focus groups for the CRC LCL project. She is also involved in collecting data with the social media analytics program TriSMA. She has undergone induction to TriSMA, working with the Swinburne-based TriSMA Data Tool Developer. Esther also participated in the CCI digital methods training workshop held at Swinburne in Feb 2015.		
Role in the project:	Supervisor to the PhD student		

### 2.4 Contact person for communication if different to the above

Name and title:	Emily van der Nagel, PhD student		
Faculty and/or Research Centre:	Faculty of Health, Arts and Design, School of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Media and Communication		
Email:	<a href="mailto:evandernagel@swin.edu.au">evandernagel@swin.edu.au</a>	Phone:	0401515094

### 2.5 Type of activity Double-click on ☐ 'check box' to select box. Select as many as applicable

<input type="checkbox"/> Research by Staff Member	<input type="checkbox"/> Contract Research (Attach contract)
<input type="checkbox"/> SUT-administered Collaborative Research	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Collaborative Research
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Supervised Postgraduate Research	<input type="checkbox"/> Supervised Honours Research
<input type="checkbox"/> Supervised Class Project (course/unit):	<input type="checkbox"/> Supervised Undergraduate Research

## 2.6 Category of Research

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Social/Cultural/Humanities	<input type="checkbox"/> Business/Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Program Evaluation
<input type="checkbox"/> Psych/Brain/Neuro-sciences	<input type="checkbox"/> Health/Safety	<input type="checkbox"/> Design
<input type="checkbox"/> Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> Sciences	<input type="checkbox"/> Technology
<input type="checkbox"/> Education	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	

## 2.7 Swinburne Class Projects:

☒ Not Applicable

This is only for class projects that involve multiple students. Give a summary of the role students will play in the conduct of the project, the training and supervisory arrangements, and indicate where student investigator involvement will be recorded.

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## 2.8 Details of non-student Co-investigators Copy box as many times as required.

Name, title and position:	Dr Anthony McCosker	Faculty and/or Research Centre:	Faculty of Health, Arts and Design, School of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Media and Communication
Email:	<a href="mailto:amccosker@swin.edu.au">amccosker@swin.edu.au</a>	Phone:	9214 4984
Qualifications and research experience relevant to the project:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PhD, BA (Hons) and Grad Cert University Teaching</li> <li>• Professional background of approximately 13 years in media and communications and higher education research</li> <li>• Experience in conducting health-related social media research, including research into the use of blogs by people suffering from cancer and other serious or terminal illness; and published methodology work in this area, including ethical considerations.</li> <li>• Member of two research teams that have involved individual and group interviews, including the development of interview protocols and consideration of ethics requirements</li> <li>• Supervision of research students at undergraduate, Masters, and PhD levels at the University of Melbourne and Swinburne University</li> <li>• 13 years of teaching experience facilitating small-group discussion</li> <li>• Member of the Young and Well (CRC) Network</li> <li>• Mental Health First Aid Certificate (Oct 2015)</li> </ul>		
Role in project:	Supervisor to the PhD student		

Name, title and position:	Associate Professor Rowan Wilken	Faculty and/or Research Centre:	Institute for Social Research
Email:	<a href="mailto:rwilken@swin.edu.au">rwilken@swin.edu.au</a>	Phone:	9214 8348
Qualifications and research experience relevant to the project:	<p>A/Prof Rowan Wilken has significant experience in undertaking media and communication and social research projects. He is well experienced in developing research interviews and in data analysis. His further skills and experience include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A PhD and BA (Hons)</li> <li>• Extensive experience as research team member on a range of internally and externally funded projects and on national competitive grant-funded projects that include individual interviews, group interviews, and focus groups, survey administration, and the development and accreditation processes and ethics protocols for accessing and handling social media data and personal technology use</li> <li>• Supervision of students at undergraduate, Masters, and PhD level at Swinburne University of Technology and the University of Melbourne</li> <li>• A professional background of over 13 years in media and communication research and teaching, including facilitating small-group discussions</li> <li>• Prior experience as a member of school-level ethics committee within the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne</li> </ul>		
Role in project:	Supervisor to the PhD student		

## 2.9 Student details (not for class projects) Copy the below table as many times as required.

Student's name, title:	Emily van der Nagel	Faculty and/or Research Centre/unit:	Faculty of Health, Arts and Design, School of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Media and Communication
Program Level: PhD, Ms by Res/Coursework, Hons etc.	PhD	Student number:	6157661
Email:	<a href="mailto:evandernagel@swin.edu.au">evandernagel@swin.edu.au</a>	Phone:	0401 515 094
Describe any research experience relevant to the project, provide details of training, monitoring and supervisory arrangements.	<p>The student researcher has the following research experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree with a major in Media and Communications</li> <li>• Attended the PhD Research Methods training week in 2012, convened by Dr Ramon Lobato and Associate Professor Ellie Rennie from the Swinburne Institute for Social Research</li> <li>• Co-organised the CCI Digital Methods Summer School held at Swinburne University in February 2015</li> <li>• Carried out several face-to-face interviews as part of a research project on the impact of high-speed broadband on Australian households</li> <li>• Completed the following online training modules through the Swinburne staff portal: 'online OH&amp;S training', 'privacy compliance', 'whistleblower protection training', and 'online EEO training'</li> </ul>		
Role in the project:	Student investigator		

## 2.10 Is this project related to any other previously submitted to SUHREC or a sub-committee?

Check the box if any of the following applies:

- ☐ A resubmission
- ☐ The continuation of a longer-term project
- ☐ A sub-component of a larger project

If any of these boxes have been checked provide the relevant SUHREC number(s) assigned.

N/A

## 2.11 Has your project been peer reviewed?

- ☐ NHMRC/ARC Peer Review Panel ☐ Other external funding body peer review
- ☐ Internal Swinburne peer review ☐ Other external peer review
- ☒ Student candidature review ☐ None

Explain briefly the extent to which this project has been subjected to review and the outcome to date:

I have completed three annual student candidature reviews to assess my progress through the PhD. The most recent review was 12 August 2015, which I passed as my progress was satisfactory.

## 2.12 Has or will this project be submitted for approval to any government departments or institutions or businesses? Provide details and attach relevant documentation.

No

## 2.13 Does the project involve research collaboration with non-Swinburne persons or organisations?

No ☒ Yes ☐

If YES then please clarify the type and degree of collaboration and include the following information:

- Swinburne approval(s) for external ethical and any safety monitoring arrangements;
- reporting arrangements to external parties dissemination of research outcomes;
- management of research materials or data including ownership of IP; and
- insurance or indemnity arrangements

## 2.14 Financial Information

**2.14.1** How is the project being funded to ensure project viability? (Please select one or more as applicable):

- ☐ Swinburne/Faculty/Unit ☒ Student Self-funding
- ☐ Scholarship/Bursary ☐ Student Employer
- ☐ Australian Competitive Grant ☐ Other Australian Public Sector Grant
- ☐ Industry Income/Grant ☐ Donations/Bequests/Trusts

☐ Overseas Public Sector

☐ Overseas Private Sector

☐ Other

Briefly clarify funding, materials and other resources being provided or subsidised.

Since this project only requires a number of people to be contacted online to provide a response to a small number of questions, the student researcher can carry it out without funding.

**2.14.2** For ARC or NHMRC-funded research, please cite ARC or NHMRC-generated ID number(s):

**2.14.3** In the case of resourcing by an external body, other than ARC/NHMRC, clarify to what extent resourcing is covered by a contract or agreement. ☒ Not applicable

**2.14.4** Outline if any conditions or restrictions have been placed on the receipt of funding including commercial-in-confidence matters, delayed publication of research outcomes, commercial ownership of research data/materials or intellectual property. ☒ Not applicable

## **2.15** Additional or Non-Swinburne Insurance/Indemnity

Check the box if the project involves any one or more of the following:

- ☐ Medical or Professional Health Assessment or Therapy
- ☐ Research conducted in a hazardous environment outside of Swinburne
- ☐ High risk equipment or procedures (not including Swinburne MRI or MEG)
- ☐ Research conducted overseas in proscribed, hazardous or unsafe areas
- ☐ Externally supplied substances or devices to use with participants

If any of these boxes have been checked then additional insurance or indemnity may be required. Please check with Swinburne Finance via your faculty. Provide details of any additional arrangements below.



## Section 3 Project Details

### 3.1 What is your project about? Provide a brief plain language summary (max 200 words). Avoid acronyms.

This research project is about social media pseudonymity. It outlines the history of pseudonymity in writing, and gives three case studies in which chosen names are important to people communicating on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Google+.

I argue that the idea of a 'real' name is used by governments and social media owners to control and govern groups of people. People use pseudonyms to control and contextualise their communication on social media, but to do so, they must negotiate websites that have particular rules about names, and others on the site that may seek to uncover their 'real' name.

There are growing expectations that people should use their 'real' names on the internet. These expectations were founded on the idea that only offline, official names are 'real', assuming that online identities and activities are trivial and inauthentic. Despite this, pseudonyms are still an important way for people to express themselves and communicate on social media.

The part of the research project for which I am seeking ethics approval is for two of my case studies on social media pseudonymity.

### 3.2 What is the research background and aims of your project? Provide a bibliography.

This research project is situated in the emerging field of social media studies, located within the media and communications discipline. This means drawing on a tradition of studying the production, consumption, meaning, and effects of media texts. This project's first two case studies look specifically at social media texts, which include posts, blogs, status updates, tweets, selfies, captions, and comments, to understand how and why people use pseudonyms on social media, and what strategies they employ around pseudonymity.

This is a departure from previous scholarship on social media, which has understood online identity as an ongoing process of creating a self through contextualised performances (boyd 2010; Ellison & boyd 2013; Liu 2007; Marwick 2013; Rettberg 2014; van Dijck 2013).

Debates over pseudonymity are really about the nature of identity and power, online and offline, as they reveal tensions about the influence of technology over identity (Moll 2014). In order to take both technology and social behaviour into account, this research project employs a mutual shaping of technology perspective, which explores the relationships between technology and society (Baym 2010; Light 2014; MacKenzie & Wajcman 1999).

With this research background, this project aims to investigate how social media pseudonyms control and contextualise communication, and to explore how platform affordances and user practices are negotiated in order for people to remain pseudonymous or to play with their online identities.

The two chapters relevant to this ethics application involve case studies of social media pseudonymity. The first is about a protest website, My Name Is Me, set up in order to give people a space to voice their concern for social media sites that demand real names, and express how important pseudonymity is to them through written statements. This was a response to the release of social media site Google+, which demanded people use 'real' names on the site. The second is a case study of subreddit Reddit Gonewild, on bulletin board Reddit, on which people post naked or semi-naked self-portrait photographs, mostly pseudonymously.

I wish to ask people who use social media why they use a pseudonym, and why pseudonymity is important to them. I am in my fourth year of my PhD, and have already drafted these case study chapters several times each – the purpose of the questionnaire at this stage is to add texture to, and strengthen, these two case studies.

#### Bibliography

Baym, NK 2010, *Personal connections in the digital age*, Digital Media and Society series, Polity Press, Cambridge.

- boyd, d 2010, 'Social network sites and networked publics: affordances, dynamics and implications', pp. 39–58 in Z Papacharissi (ed), *A networked self: identity, community, and culture on social network sites*, Taylor & Francis, Hoboken.
- Ellison, NB & boyd, dm 2013, 'Sociality through social network sites', pp. 151–172 in *Oxford handbook of internet studies*, Oxford University Press.
- Hall, S 1996, 'Introduction: who needs 'identity'?', pp. 1–17 in S Hall & P du Gay (eds), *Questions of cultural identity*, Sage, London.
- Hogan, B 2013, 'Pseudonyms and the rise of the real-name web', pp. 290–307 in J Hartley, J Burgess, A Bruns (eds), *A companion to new media dynamics*, Wiley Blackwell, Chichester.
- Light, B 2014, *Disconnecting with social networking sites*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Liu, H 2007, 'Social network profiles as taste performances', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13, no. 1.
- MacKenzie, DA & Wajcman, J 1999, *The social shaping of technology*, 2nd edn, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Rettberg, JW 2014, *Seeing ourselves through technology: how we use selfies, blogs and wearable devices to see and shape ourselves*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- van Dijck, J 2013, *The culture of connectivity: a critical history of social media*, Oxford University Press.

### 3.3 How will you go about your project? Clearly detail all procedures and methods to be employed specifically those that involve human participants.

I am seeking first-hand accounts from people who are pseudonymous, or value pseudonymity on social media. I will contact people online to respond to a short questionnaire about their experience of, and views on, pseudonymity.

There are two groups of people who I seek to contact: people who made statements about the value of pseudonymity for 2011 protest website My Name Is Me, which demanded that Google+ allow pseudonyms; and people who post (mostly pseudonymous) selfies to Reddit Gonewild.

#### *Method*

This research project involves a questionnaire, to be sent to potential participants. As the most significant aspect of a questionnaire is the time and effort required to complete it (Denscombe 2014), my questionnaire consists of four or five open-ended questions, followed by a small number of demographic questions. The advantage of open-ended questions on a questionnaire is that they allow participants to answer in their own words, in their own time, without interference from the researcher (Denscombe 2014).

#### *Population*

The population size for the My Name Is Me group is 47 people – of the 53 original participants, one is a minor and will not be contacted, and four have no publicly available contact information. Only My Name Is Me people with a public web presence will be contacted for the research project. Thirty-five of this group of 53 have public Twitter accounts (on Twitter, people have the option to make their accounts private, meaning followers must be approved before they can see tweets), and 21 have personal websites, with contact forms that they use to invite comments and questions from the public.

The population size for the Reddit group will be a minimum of 20 respondents from the Gonewild subreddit.

I am expecting at least 10 responses from the My Name Is Me group, and at least 20 from Reddit. This population size is not intended to be representative of all social media users; rather, it is designed to collect first-hand accounts of attitudes towards, and practices of, pseudonymity.

#### *Recruitment*

My Name Is Me participants have already had statements on pseudonymity published in 2011. This group of people are high-profile figures in their own fields, and include academics, members of the LGBTI community, sex workers, educators, video game players, performers, authors, whistleblowers, and activists.

Redditors on Gonewild will be contacted by sending private messages to their publicly available Reddit account. At no stage of the recruitment, data collection, analysis, or publication process will I need to know their real names – it is up to the individual participant whether they have their comments attributed to their name, pseudonym, or

whether they choose to remain anonymous. Participants that express a wish to be pseudonymous or anonymous will not be asked to reveal their real name. I will not be publishing any images of any participant.

Potential participants will be contacted if they post on the subreddit in the allocated research time: between 22 February and 19 December 2016, until 20 responses are reached.

#### *Data collection*

I will ask participants to indicate how they wish to be referred to: by their full name, pseudonym, or kept anonymous. If participants choose to be anonymous, they will be assigned a participant number. Giving participants the choice of name aligns with the research focus of the importance of pseudonyms, and allows the participant to either be unidentifiable, or have their comments attributed to them, as some people online wish to be credited with their comments (Waller, Farquharson & Dempsey 2016).

When participants send back written responses, they will be saved in Word documents and Excel spreadsheets along with their associated demographic information, if they have chosen to provide it. This data will be stored on a password-protected computer housed within the Swinburne Institute for Social Research.

#### *Data analysis*

Responses to the questionnaire will be coded for themes using content analysis, a qualitative research method. Content analysis focuses on the content of texts, and involves reading written material closely for meaning, then categorising it thematically (Waller, Farquharson & Dempsey 2016). Following Johnny Saldaña's (2013) process of coding qualitative data, I will first be attribute coding, or logging demographic information about the participants along with their responses, then descriptively coding for themes.

I have already developed categories for my first case study on social media pseudonyms, which The My Name Is Me responses will help to refine. From news reports, blogs, and the original My Name Is Me statements, I have developed four main reasons for being pseudonymous: to protect vulnerable groups, to ensure individual freedom and choice, to avoid data collection by governments and corporations, and for context management.

The Reddit Gonewild data will be coded in categories that emerge from the responses, based on their pseudonymity practices; in other words, how they either remain unidentifiable or reveal parts of their identity.

#### References

Denscombe, M 2014, *The good research guide for small-scale social research projects*, 5th edn, Open University Press, Buckingham.

Saldaña, J 2013, *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*, 2nd edn, Sage, London.

Waller, V, Farquharson, K & Dempsey, D 2016, *Qualitative social research: contemporary methods for the digital age*, Sage, Los Angeles.

### **3.4 What are the benefits of your project?**

The benefits of this research project will be a deeper understanding of pseudonymity on social media in the early 2010s, particularly how people remain pseudonymous when the expectation is that they will provide their real name, and how they play with pseudonymity to reveal different facets of their identity to selective groups of people.

The participants in this research project will contribute valuable insights into their personal attitudes towards social media pseudonymity, and their own pseudonymity practices. This will add first-hand accounts to the other data I have gathered throughout my PhD, which include news articles and blogs about social media pseudonymity, and observations of social media affordances and content.

### **3.5 Where is the human research component of your project to take place?**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Online survey/questionnaire	<input type="checkbox"/> Swinburne (Australia)
<input type="checkbox"/> Other. State all locations. Specify any external organisations involved, contracts, and status.	

**3.6 If research is to be conducted with or about participants living outside Australia, outline any local legislation, regulations, permissions or customs that need to be addressed before the research can commence.** Attach authorising correspondence and/or approval documentation to the application. **NS 4.8**

N/A

## Section 4 Participants or their data and Recruitment

### 4.1 Who will be the participants? 'Participants' includes data about people or human tissue samples.

Add rows as required.

Participant/participant group details	Number of people/samples	Age range	Gender
The 47 people from the My Name Is Me website who have publicly accessible contact details	47	Over 18	Based on the data each person provided: 26 female, 17 male, 1 queer, 2 transgender, 1 unspecified
People who post to Reddit Gonewild, a thread on online bulletin board Reddit	Minimum of 20	Over 18: every person who accesses or posts to Gonewild must agree to the terms and conditions of the subreddit, which include confirming they are over 18 and willing to see adult material.	Not yet known

### 4.2 What is your justification for targeting these participants?

I am targeting the group of people featured on protest website My Name Is Me because they were recruited in 2011 to provide statements for the website, based on the fact that they are public figures who are well known in their respective fields, and they have a vested interest in social media sites allowing people to use pseudonyms.

I am targeting people who post selfies to Reddit Gonewild because most of them post self-portrait photographs pseudonymously. This group of people will have valuable insights into how they choose to present themselves and their identity information on the site.

### 4.3 What are the participant selection and exclusion criteria?

Participants from My Name Is Me were selected because of their involvement in the 2011 website. I have excluded the one minor from this project, and the four people whose contact details were not publicly available.

Participants from Reddit Gonewild who post to the subreddit from 15 February to 15 March 2016 will be invited to participate in the research project.

### 4.4 Where will the participants be recruited or sourced from?

The participants from My Name Is Me will be followed up with according to their publicly available contact details: that is, if I can find their email address, a contact form on their personal website, or Twitter account, I will contact them.

The people from the My Name Is Me website are public figures, usually high-profile within their own sphere, and would expect to be contacted online. They have already had their statements about the topic of pseudonymity published online in a public website in 2011. Of the 53 people on the My Name Is Me website, 35 have public Twitter accounts, and 21 have websites of their own, with contact forms that they use to invite comments and questions from the public.

The Reddit participants will have posted to Reddit Gonewild, an exhibitionist subreddit for naked and semi-naked self-portrait photographs, which will be my reason for contacting them. On Reddit, usernames are overwhelmingly pseudonyms rather than first and last names, and on Gonewild in particular, the selfies posted to the site are mostly posted pseudonymously, with their faces cropped out of the shot or hidden from view. I will explain that this is my

reason for contacting them. Everyone who has an account on Reddit can be sent a message from anyone else who has an account on the site – this message goes to their private Reddit inbox and cannot be seen by anyone else on Reddit.

**4.5 What materials will be used to recruit participants and how will they be used?** Attach all material to this application.

To recruit participants, I'll be sending potential participants messages inviting them to participate in the research project. I will contact the people from the My Name Is Me site through email, contact form on website, or Twitter, depending on what information they have publicly available, and I will be sending people on Reddit Gonewild private messages through the site – see Appendix 2a and 2b for the initial contact messages.

**4.6 How and by whom will initial contact with the participants be made?**

I will be making initial contact with the participants, through email, contact form, Twitter, or by private message on Reddit.

**4.7 Will any personal information such as names, contact details or email addresses be accessed for purposes of recruitment? If yes, outline how and by whom this information will be accessed.**

The only personal information to be collected will be contact details such as email addresses, Twitter accounts, or Reddit usernames. I will be collecting the pseudonyms of the participants from My Name Is Me, and the usernames from those on Reddit Gonewild – but it is not necessary to discover, or record, their full name. My Name Is Me participants will be contacted on their publicly available email address or Twitter account. Redditors will be contacted through the private Reddit inbox of their publicly available Reddit account.

Participants will be invited to provide demographic information including their age, gender, occupation, city and country of residence, education level, and the social media sites they actively use (see Appendix 2).

**4.8 How and when will information about the proposed research activities will be provided to participants and any third parties?**

The participants will be given a link to further information about the research project when first contact is made (see Appendix 1).

**4.9 Explain how and when consent will be obtained from participants and any third parties?** This also includes if consent will not be sought due to covert observation or a deliberate decision not to seek consent. Check all boxes that apply.

Type of consent		Yes
Consent waiver		<input type="checkbox"/>
For those participants who have the capacity to give voluntary and informed consent		
	Written consent	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Oral consent	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Implied consent (see Appendix 3)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Other	<input type="checkbox"/>
For those participants who have limited or no capacity or authority to give voluntary and informed consent		
	Written consent	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Oral consent	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Implied consent	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

Explain how each consent method will be used, which participants will be involved and why.

A link to a website with further information will be provided with the initial contact. The website will describe the research project and explain how the participant's information will be used (see Appendix 1).

Each participant will be asked to fill out a written consent form (see Appendix 3) that requires them to type their name and the date, instead of signing the form by hand. This gives me a clear indication that they consent to participate in the project while reducing the burden on participants, as asking people online to print, sign, scan, and send a form can be an off-putting task.

If a potential participant does not wish to participate in the research project, they are not obliged to reply to my initial contact.

#### 4.10 For participants not fluent in English or who have difficulty understanding English, what arrangements will be made to ensure comprehension of the research information?

I do not anticipate any participants will have difficulty understanding English.

#### 4.11 Will there be any dependant or unequal relationships between the researchers and the participants?

☐ Yes

☒ No

If Yes then describe the nature of the relationship and how the ethical issues arising are being addressed.

## 4.12 What is the time commitment required?

**4.12.1** For each of the research activities in your project indicate the approximate time commitment required of participants.

Research activity	Estimated time per participant	Research activity	Estimated time per participant
Interviews	<input type="checkbox"/>	Focus groups	<input type="checkbox"/>
Survey/Questionnaire	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 10–15 minutes to reply to four or five questions and answer some brief demographic information.	Social media analysis	<input type="checkbox"/>
Data sets	<input type="checkbox"/>	Observation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Academic records	<input type="checkbox"/>	Medical records	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal documents, records or other materials (other than academic or medical records)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Case studies	<input type="checkbox"/>
Medical, Biomedical or Physiological test, treatment or interventions	<input type="checkbox"/>	Drugs or complementary medicines	<input type="checkbox"/>
Body organs, tissues or fluids	<input type="checkbox"/>	Psychological testing or treatment	<input type="checkbox"/>
Phlebotomy (Blood sampling)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>

**4.12.2 Provide a description of each of the activities checked above:** Attach documents as applicable.

For a copy of the questionnaire, which will comprise four questions for My Name Is Me participants, and five questions for Reddit Gonewild participants, along with a small amount of demographic information, see Appendix 1.



## Section 5 Data Collection, Retention, Use and Disposal

### 5.1 Select the option(s) that reflects the type(s) of data that will be received or handled throughout the research:

Type of data	YES
Non-identifiable: data received or collected about participants, that is, received in a non-identifiable form. This includes data which have never had personal identifiers e.g. an anonymous survey, or from which identifiers have been permanently removed before you received it. It is not possible for you to identify a specific individual.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Re-identifiable: data from which personal identifiers have been removed and replaced by a code. The data is either received with a code already attached and personal identifiers have been removed or you remove identifiers and replace with code. It remains possible for you or others to re-identify a specific individual by, for example, using the code or linking different data sets.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Individually Identifiable: data where the identity of an individual could be reasonably ascertained. Examples of identifiers include the individual's name, image, date of birth or address, or in some cases their position in an organisation.	<input type="checkbox"/>

### 5.2 Compliance with Privacy and/or Health Records legislation:

Does the research involve collection, use or disclosure of health, sensitive or personal information without consent from the individual(s) the information relates to?	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
---	---------------------------------	---

If you answered YES to the above question you will need to provide a proposal to SUHREC as to why the public interest value of your research out-weighs the public interest in the protection of privacy. The proposal must address the appropriate statutory or other guidelines. Please see the Guide for more information.

### 5.3 How will researcher(s) protect the privacy and confidentiality of participant data and samples during the collection and/or recruitment phase?

The messages asking the participants to be involved will be sent privately, to their publicly available contact information.

### 5.4 How will researcher(s) protect the privacy and confidentiality of participant data and samples during the data analysis phase?

The researcher will be asking each participant to either choose a name for their comments to be attributed to, or have them published anonymously. If a participant requests their comments to be anonymous, I will assign them a participant number. During the data analysis phase, the participants' chosen name or assigned participant number will be used.

### 5.5 Are you taking photographs or recordings including radiology and fingerprinting of participants using audio tape, film/video, or other electronic medium? And if so how are these to be used? Provide the details below.

No. Their emailed or messaged responses to questions along with their contact and demographic information will be the only thing recorded.

## **5.6 How will the information or data be analysed and who will have access?**

I (Emily, the student researcher) will be the only person who can access the data, as it will be kept on my password-protected computer within the Swinburne Institute for Social Research.

Responses to the questionnaire will be coded for themes using content analysis, a qualitative research method. Content analysis focuses on the content of texts, and involves reading written material closely for meaning, then categorising it thematically (Waller, Farquharson, & Dempsey 2016). Following Johnny Saldaña's (2013) process of coding qualitative data, I will first be attribute coding, or logging demographic information about the participants along with their responses, then descriptively coding for themes, as outlined in Section 3.3.

### References

Saldaña, J 2013, *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*, 2nd edn, Sage, London.

Waller, V, Farquharson, K & Dempsey, D 2016, *Qualitative social research: contemporary methods for the digital age*, Sage, Los Angeles.

## **5.7 Will participants receive feedback of findings prior to any publication (including access to transcripts of interviews or drafts of reports)?**

If participants request to see drafts of thesis chapters that contain information they have provided, I will send them the chapters prior to publication.

## **5.8 How will researcher(s) protect the privacy and confidentiality of participant data and samples during the reporting of research results?**

Since this research project is about pseudonymity and the importance of choosing names, I will be offering the participants the option of having quotes from them published under their own name, a pseudonym, or anonymously.

## **5.9 How will the project outcomes be made publicly accessible at the end of the project and in what forms?**

The project outcomes will be available in my PhD thesis, which will be publicly available on Swinburne's Research Bank. It is anticipated that the results will also be included in future research outputs, including journal articles, conference papers, book chapters, and/or books.

## **5.10 For all records and materials (written or electronic and including signed consent documents) used or collected during the project, what are the storage methods, location and accessibility to the items both during and after completion of the project?**

I will be keeping all participant information on a password-protected computer, located within Swinburne's Institute for Social Research, which can only be accessed by approved swipe cards.

### 5.11 What is the minimum time that the records and materials will be retained by the University?

- ☐ Enough time for Internal student assessment and requirements only (eg, undergraduate or coursework projects)
- ☒ 5 years after any publication or published outcome
- ☐ 7 years after last health-related interaction with participant(s) or last health service provision
- ☐ 15 years after last interaction with participant(s) (eg, for clinical trials)
- ☐ Until participant(s) who were minors at the time of research participation attain 25 years of age (eg, identifiable health-related information involving minors)
- ☐ Indefinite period or archived permanently
- ☐ Other - clarify below.

### 5.12 Do you plan to use the data in future research projects?

Yes, I may draw on this data for future research projects including articles, book chapters, books, and conferences. This will be made clear to research participants in the information statement about the project.

## Section 6 Ethical Considerations

In addition to the ethical considerations pertaining to all research participants, researchers should be aware of the specific issues that arise in terms of the design, conduct and ethical review of research involving various categories of participants as outlined in the *National Statement Section 4*.

### 6.1 What are the likely impacts to participants in this project?

This research project involves encouraging participants to reflect on the names they use on social media, and their thoughts on social media pseudonymity. This is an opportunity for self-reflection, and to consider the kinds of names that they use online, and the potential pleasures and difficulties of using a pseudonym on social media.

### 6.2 What are the likely risks for participants?

The participants will be invited to reflect on their own social media practices involving their name and image. Participants may experience mild discomfort when faced with questions about the self and names. Participants will be informed they can skip questions or withdraw their participation from the study at any moment.

Although participants from My Name Is Me are public figures, participants who post to Reddit Gonewild risk embarrassment or reputation damage if their identity can be discovered from their comments.

### 6.3 How will the risks will be minimised and mitigated?

If a participant does not wish to answer any of the questions sent to them, they are not obliged to reply to the message. If they wish to ask for further information or clarification about the project, they are given my email address so they can contact me directly and privately (see Appendix 1).

Answers from people who post to Reddit Gonewild will be carefully treated so there is a very low risk of them being personally identified. All participants will be offered the choice to either have their comments published under their full name, a pseudonym, or remain anonymous in published outputs. In this way, I offer participants control over how their comments are made public. Especially if a participant wishes to remain anonymous, I will not publish any comment that I believe may identify them, including names of educational institutions, workplaces, or cities of residence.

At no stage during the collection, analysis, or publication of data will I require any participants' real names. I will be contacting Reddit Gonewild participants through private messages to their publicly accessible Reddit account. I will not be publishing any images from the site.

An appropriate counselling service can be recommended should participants express concern: Lifeline, a 24-hour free phone counselling service available by calling 13 11 14.

### 6.4 How do the likely benefits of the project justify the burden(s) and/or risk(s) to participants?

As the participants in this research project will contribute valuable insights into their attitudes towards pseudonymity, and their pseudonymity practices, it is worth the burden to them of spending 10–15 minutes filling in a short questionnaire, and running the very slight risk of them either being identified or feeling mild discomfort over being asked questions about their names.

**6.5 Outline the protocol that will be followed in the event of any reportable adverse events.**

Any adverse affects will be reported to the HREC in writing.

**6.6 Will participants be reimbursed in any way?**

**6.6.1** Will participants receive any reimbursement of out of pocket expenses, or financial or other rewards as a result of participation?

☒ No

☐ Yes – clarify and justify below

☐ Yes via the REP – Go to Q6.6.2

**6.6.2** If using the Psychology Research Experience Program (REP), then attach the advertising brief used on the REP site, the debriefing statement, and declare the amount of credit awarded.

N/A

**6.7 Does the research involve limited disclosure including active concealment and explicit deception? If YES, provide a justification.**

No.

**6.8 Are there any possible risks to the health or safety of the researcher(s) when undertaking this project? Describe how these risks will be mitigated and managed.**

The only risks to the health and safety of the researcher is negative feedback from potential participants. If potential participants become rude or threatening, the researcher will not continue to approach them for their participation in the project.

**6.9 Could there be any possible risks to others not directly involved arising from this project and how will these be mitigated and managed? This can include relatives of participants, bystanders, the University or sponsor.**

This research project is asking participants to reflect on their own pseudonymity practices, and opinions about pseudonymity in general, so risks to others are not anticipated.

**6.10 Does your project investigate any activity or use a method that is or might be considered to be illegal? NS 4.6**

☐ Yes

☒ No

If yes then please answer the following questions:

<b>6.10.1</b>	Are you researching any activity or using a method that is or might be considered illegal? Or could your research uncover illegal activity? Includes researching illegal/illicit substance use, offences, violence, abuse, bullying, etc.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<b>6.10.2</b>	Could any aspect of your study reasonably be expected to place a participant, a researcher or other party at risk of criminal or civil liability?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

If you answered yes to either one of the above questions, then explain and justify why you should be able to proceed with the project.

**6.11 Is there any personal benefit (i.e. financial) for researchers in this study or its outcomes that might represent a perceived, potential or actual conflict of interest?**

There is no personal benefit to the researchers, and there is no conflict of interest in carrying out the research.

## Section 7 Declarations and Signatures

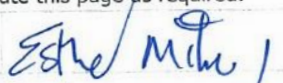
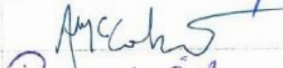
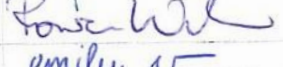

All persons named in Section 1 are required to sign below. In the case of multiple-student class projects, the CI/Supervisor is responsible for keeping the list of students bound by the above declaration. The CI is responsible for personnel subsequently joining or leaving the project and submitting a modification request to the Research Office.

### 7.1 Declaration by Chief Investigator, co-investigators and students

I/we, the researcher(s) agree that:

- All information is truthful and as complete as possible;
- I/we will conduct the project in accordance with our responsibilities under the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)*, its updates or modifications, and the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*;
- I/we will consult any relevant legislation and regulations in order to conduct the project in accordance with these;
- I/we will conduct the project in accordance with Swinburne requirements and the standard or special ethics clearance conditions including provision of reports as required;
- I/we will only carry out this project with adequate funding and personnel available to enable the project to be conducted according to good research practice and in an ethical manner; and to
- I/we will immediately report in writing to the HREC of any adverse or unforeseen events.

Expand this table or duplicate this page as required.

CI signature		Name	Associate Professor Esther Milne	Date	9/2/16
Co-investigator		Name	Dr Anthony McCosker	Date	9/2/16
Co-investigator		Name	Associate Professor Rowan Wilken	Date	09/02/16
Student researcher		Name	Emily van der Nagel	Date	9/2/16

## 7.2 Additional declaration for supervisor(s) of student(s)

I/we agree to:

- Provide appropriate supervision to the student(s) to ensure that the project is undertaken in accordance with the agreement above;
- Ensure that appropriate training is provided necessary to enable the project to be undertaken skilfully and ethically.

Supervisor signature		Name		Date	
Supervisor signature		Name		Date	
Supervisor signature		Name		Date	

## 7.3 Endorsement by Academic Unit Head or above

I declare that:

- I am familiar with this project and endorse its undertaking;
- The resources to undertake this project are available; and that
- The researchers have the skill and expertise to undertake this project appropriately or will undergo appropriate training as specified in this application.

Signature		Name		Date	
Position					



## Section 8: Checklist

The following documents are attached to this application:

Yes	No	N/A*	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Evidence of approval from Government departments, institutions or businesses, including comments and requested alterations to the application. <b>Q2.12</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Additional Indemnity or insurance <b>Q2.13 and 2.15</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Research with people outside Australia: Evidence of permissions, approvals from overseas authorities etc <b>Q3.5 and 3.6</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Participant Information Statement: either as information sheet, verbal script or survey preamble. <b>Q4.5</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Consent Form for a participant in a research project (written consent is required for the majority of projects). <b>Q4.5</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Consent by a Third Party to Participation Form (required where participants are children under 18 years or a dependent adult). <b>Q4.5</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Other recruitment documentation including advertisements, flyers, recruitment letters, emails of introduction, copy of Facebook event pages and social media event sites. <b>Q4.5</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Procedure/protocol for interviews or focus groups including topics, questions or themes. <b>Q4.12.2</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Survey instrument/Questionnaire (include a printed copy of on-line survey). <b>Q4.12.2</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Proposal to access information protected by the Privacy Act 1988 Sections 95 and 95A <b>Q5.2</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Adverse events procedure. <b>Q5.2</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	REP documentation <b>Q 6.6</b>

\*Not applicable

All documents attached should be referred to in the main body of the application and should be clearly labelled using appropriate headings i.e. Attachment 1, Attachment 2 etc. The whole application, including attachments, must be numbered in sequential order.

## Section 9: How to Submit this Application

1. Convert the completed form to a pdf and, inserting all of the attachments, create a single pdf.
2. Number the pages of the single pdf sequentially.
3. Print the signature pages and get all of the required signatures.
4. Scan the signature pages and email the single pdf file plus the signature pages to:  
[resethics@swin.edu.au](mailto:resethics@swin.edu.au)

[Submission deadlines](#) apply to all applications requiring main committee (SUHREC) or sub-committee review (SHESC). Research schedules should allow for the possibility that a project submitted as a low risk application may be deemed to involve more than low risk, or to raise other issues, therefore requiring full review. Researchers may be requested to provide additional information.

## Appendix 1: Project information website/consent form



### **Project Title: Social media pseudonymity**

**Researchers:** Emily van der Nagel, Associate Professor Esther Milne, Dr Anthony McCosker, and Associate Professor Rowan Wilken

My name is Emily van der Nagel, and I'm the student investigator for a PhD project on social media pseudonymity at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia. This research project studies why people who use social media choose different usernames, and how social media platforms allow or forbid pseudonyms.

Because of your involvement with the 2011 My Name Is Me website/because you have posted to Reddit, I'm inviting you to respond to some questions about social media pseudonyms. The purpose of this is to ask you to reflect on your views on, and use of, social media pseudonymity.

If you would like to be part of this study, you can email your answers to [evandernagel@swin.edu.au](mailto:evandernagel@swin.edu.au), or ask further questions about the research project. If you would not like to be part of the study, there is no obligation to reply, and you can opt out at any time.

Your interest in this project is greatly appreciated.

Emily van der Nagel  
PhD candidate  
Swinburne University of Technology  
[evandernagel@swin.edu.au](mailto:evandernagel@swin.edu.au)  
Twitter: @emvdn

This project has been approved by or on behalf of Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC) in line with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this project, you can contact:

Research Ethics Officer, Swinburne Research (H68),  
Swinburne University of Technology, PO Box 218, HAWTHORN VIC 3122.  
Tel (03) 9214 5218 or +61 3 9214 5218 or [resethics@swin.edu.au](mailto:resethics@swin.edu.au)

## Appendix 2a: Email and questionnaire for *My Name Is Me* participants

Dear [name of participant],

I'm emailing to invite you to participate in a research project about social media pseudonymity. My name is Emily van der Nagel, and I'm a PhD student at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia. Associate Professor Esther Milne, Dr Anthony McCosker, and Associate Professor Rowan Wilken are my supervisors. My PhD thesis is about the names people use on social media sites, and how these platforms allow or forbid people from using pseudonyms.

Since you gave a statement for the 2011 website *My Name Is Me* (which I've provided below), I'm interested in your response to some questions that ask you to reflect on your views on, and use of, social media pseudonymity. If you'd like to answer them, could you reply to me before 31 March 2016?

More information about the project is available [here](#) [link to project information website].

The questions are:

1. Do you think pseudonymity is important on social media? Why?
2. Has it ever been a challenge remaining pseudonymous on social media? In what ways?
3. Can you comment on whether your online identity is faithful to your offline identity? Do you perceive them to be different in any important ways?
4. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience of, or views on, social media pseudonymity?

If you would like to provide demographic details about yourself to help with the research project, please fill in your:

Age:

Gender:

Occupation:

City and country of residence:

Education level:

Social media sites you actively use:

It's your choice whether you'd like to have your responses attributed to your full name or a chosen pseudonym, or whether you'd like to remain anonymous:

\_ Name/pseudonym: [please indicate] \_\_\_\_\_ OR

\_ I would prefer to remain anonymous

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

Emily van der Nagel

PhD candidate

Swinburne University of Technology

[evandernagel@swin.edu.au](mailto:evandernagel@swin.edu.au)

Twitter: @emvdn

[Copy of participant's original statement featured on the *My Name Is Me* site]

## Appendix 2b: Message and questionnaire for Reddit participants

*Note: This message is shorter and less formal than the previous email to fit with the tone and style of Reddit posts.*

Hi, my name is Emily and I'm a PhD researcher from Swinburne University in Melbourne, Australia. Associate Professor Esther Milne, Dr Anthony McCosker, and Associate Professor Rowan Wilken are my supervisors.

I'm writing a PhD thesis on social media pseudonyms, and I'd like to find out from you why you post pseudonymously to Reddit, and what you think about social media pseudonymity.

If you'd like to reflect on your Reddit posts, could you answer the following questions before 31 March 2016? You can find more detail on my research project [here](#) [link to project information website].

1. Do you think pseudonymity is important on social media? Why?
2. Do you use your real name on Reddit? Why? If you use a pseudonym or handle when you post, how do you know this will remain separate from your real name?
3. Has it ever been a challenge remaining pseudonymous on social media? In what ways?
4. Can you comment on whether your online identity is faithful to your offline identity? Do you perceive them to be different in any important ways?
5. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience of, or views on, social media pseudonymity?

If you would like to provide demographic details about yourself to help with the research project, please fill in your:

Age:

Gender:

Occupation:

City and country of residence:

Education level:

Social media sites you actively use:

It's your choice whether you'd like to have your responses attributed to your full name or a chosen pseudonym, or whether you'd like to remain anonymous:

☐ Name/pseudonym: [please indicate] \_\_\_\_\_ OR

☐ I would prefer to remain anonymous

Thank you for your time.

Emily van der Nagel

PhD candidate

Swinburne University of Technology

### Appendix 3: Consent form



**Project Title: Social media pseudonymity**

**Researchers:** Emily van der Nagel, Associate Professor Esther Milne, Dr Anthony McCosker, and Associate Professor Rowan Wilken

I consent to participate in this research project. I have been provided a copy of the project information statement to which this consent form relates, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

Please put an X next to your response:

- I agree to answer the questionnaire sent by the researcher      Yes \_ No \_
- I agree to have my responses recorded      Yes \_ No \_
- I agree to answer further questions if required      Yes \_ No \_

I acknowledge:

- (a) My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation;
- (b) The Swinburne project is for the purpose of research and not for profit;
- (c) Any identifiable information about me which is gathered in the course of and as the result of my participation will be retained for the purpose of this project, and accessed and analysed by the researcher for the purpose of conducting this project;
- (d) My comments will be used in the current research project (a PhD thesis), as well as publications by the researcher in the future, including articles, book chapters, and books;
- (e) I may choose to have my comments credited to my name or chosen pseudonym, or to remain anonymous.

By typing my name or pseudonym below, I agree to participate in this project.

**Name or pseudonym of participant:**

**Date:**

This project has been approved by or on behalf of Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC) in line with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. If you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of this project, you can contact:

Research Ethics Officer, Swinburne Research (H68),  
Swinburne University of Technology, P O Box 218, HAWTHORN VIC 3122.  
Tel (03) 9214 5218 or +61 3 9214 5218 or [resethics@swin.edu.au](mailto:resethics@swin.edu.au)