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Author(s): Leppänen, Sirpa; Tapionkaski, Sanna

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Sirpa Leppänen & Sanna Tapionkaski

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ABSTRACT (*not included in the word count*)

In this chapter our focus is on how members in participatory cultures engage in everyday, informal and interest-driven social and discursive practices primarily on social media, but in ways that also relate to the material and physical contexts of their lives. In particular, we will show how social actors operating in these sites construct gender and sexuality intersectionally and multimodally. Intersectionality, we argue, is a crucial notion for understanding and explaining how gender and sexuality are always constructed at particular intersections with other identity categories. With respect to both digital and physical participatory activities, multi-semioticity is, in turn, necessary as an analytic perspective: it allows the investigation of how in these activities, participants routinely draw on and deploy a range of multimodal and embodied resources for the production of discursive, social and cultural meaning.

In our discussion of the nexus of participatory cultural practices, social media, intersectionality and multimodality, we will highlight how, in order to capture the multi-sited and entangled nature of how gender and sexuality are constructed in the lived realities of participants, the analysis needs to rely on insights provided by a range of disciplines. We will illustrate this with the help of examples of our previous studies. Guided by our specific research questions and data, in these studies we have designed multi-disciplinary approaches that have selectively drawn on theoretical and methodological tools suggested by ethnography, cultural

studies, sociolinguistics of social media, language and gender studies, intersectionality theory, discourse studies and the study of multimodality and embodied action.

DOING GENDER AND SEXUALITY INTERSECTIONALLY IN MULTIMODAL SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES

Sirpa Leppänen & Sanna Tapionkaski

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, our focus is on how members in participatory cultures, such as fan groups and communities around user-generated content on social media, engage in informal and interest-driven social and discursive practices primarily on social media, but in ways that intertwine with their offline lives. In particular, we will show how social media participants construct their gendered and sexual identities through cultural practices at specific intersections with other socio-cultural categories.

Before this, however, it is important to understand what we mean by social media, and why social media practices matter in terms of research on language, gender and sexuality. Social media can be defined as digital applications that build on the ideological and technological premises and foundations of Web 2.0 (e.g. Herring 2013) allowing the creation, exchange and circulation of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010) and enabling interaction between users. Social media encompass both applications explicitly building on the idea of mutual exchange of content, and digital environments in which the main content can consist of single-authored or monophonic discourse but that also offer an opportunity to authors and recipients to interact with one another (such as discussion sections of blog sites).

Social media are sites for everyday social interaction that intertwine with and complement physical activities and interactions. In terms of gender and sexuality they also matter a great deal. They can provide individuals and groups with ‘affordances’ (i.e. enablings and constraints for behaviour provided by some object or environment to some agent (Gibson 1986)) for doing gender and sexuality in different ways. Sometimes these ways can be novel and liberating, at other times they can replicate distinctions and power relations that are typical of other contexts, and yet other times involve and impose forms of constraint that are specific to the technological activities and interactions in digital media contexts (see e.g. Herring and Kapidzic 2015).

In research on how gendered and sexualised identities are constructed on social media, an approach is needed that can capture their complexity and embeddedness in relations of power. We suggest that this approach can rely on the notion of *intersectionality*. Gender and sexuality are always constructed at intersections with other identity categories, and these multifaceted identity constructions are often part of particular identity politics in relations, contexts and formations of power (Hill Collins and Blige 2016). While intersectionality has various meanings, in our approach focusing on identity work in digitally mediated contexts, we argue that an *anti-categorical approach to intersectionality* (McCall 2005) is particularly useful. In brief, this approach does not take identity categories such as gender or sexuality for granted but examines how a complex array of various intersecting categories – and norms related to categories – emerge in everyday contexts of social life. Here, this will involve studying how participants in social media perform, negotiate and struggle over gendered and sexualised identities *multimodally* by drawing on various meaning-making resources such as language, other semiotic symbols and (sub-) cultural scripts that index specific understandings of gender and sexuality in particular digital contexts. This happens, first, by paying attention to the ways in which, in the context of specific participatory cultural practices, people orient to

norms of gender and sexuality, by adhering to or rejecting particular norms, or by positioning themselves critically in relation to them. Second, our analyses pay attention to the availability of and access to various multimodal meaning-making resources: despite the relatively broad access to social media (in the West), not everyone has the same access to or knowledge of resources used in online identity construction. That is, it matters who is able to do what kind of performances, where and when. To examine the potential inequalities in these practices, we suggest that an ethnographic understanding of people's lived realities on- and offline should support the analyses of discourse practices in social media.

SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITIES AND INTERACTIONS CALL FOR A TRANSDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORK

In such investigations, we argue, a transdisciplinary framework that draws on discourse studies, ethnography, sociolinguistics and the study of multimodality can be particularly useful. A detailed analysis of social media discourse practices, and social meanings constructed in them, combined with the ethnographic understanding of the studied phenomenon, can enable the scrutiny of the complex intersectional identity work that can occur even in a very limited amount of social media data.

Discourse studies offer tools to study the ways in which people do their identities online through their linguistic and discursive choices. In such analyses attention can be paid to what kind of language resources participants draw on, what is made visible and/what not, and what kind of norms and discourses related to gender and sexuality they mobilise – discourses here referring to the regulatory practices that constitute for us what counts as truth, reality and knowledge (Foucault 1978; Baxter 2003). For its part, immersive ethnographic fieldwork that

can either range from discourse-centred (Androutsopoulos 2008) to multi-sited (on/offline) ethnography (Staehr 2015) enables a nuanced understanding of the studied phenomenon from both the emic (insider) perspective of the participants and the analyst's etic (outsider) perspective. That is, without understanding the specific social, cultural and media contexts of the participatory practices, it may be impossible for the researcher to recognise the particular sociolinguistic contextual cues (or indices, Silverstein 2006) that the specific choices have and how these contribute to identity work.

Paying attention to contextual cues (i.e. indexicality) can explain how language users interpret each other's and index meanings in their own linguistic and discursive identity construction. Language use, or verbal and textual means - such as languages, varieties, styles and genres - are important resources in this. Further, communication can be monolingual or multilingual in nature; and it can also involve code switches as a means for creating specific discourse-level meanings (Leppänen 2012).

However, besides verbal and textual resources, social media participants can also mobilise resources provided by other modes. In this task, the study of multimodality (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen 2006) is necessary as an analytic perspective: it allows the investigation of how social media users also draw on a range of multimodal and embodied resources for the production of meaning. These can include textual forms and patterns, visuality, still and moving images, sound, music, facial expressions, bodily actions, gestures, and performances, as well as cultural discourses. They also involve processes of recontextualisation in which discourse chunks are lifted from their original context and re-embedded in new contexts (Bauman & Briggs 1990), and of resemiotisation whereby discourse content is converted from one mode to other/s, from verbal text to (moving) image, for example (Iedema 2003).

In the following, we will first discuss critical issues related to intersectionality. We will touch upon some historical perspectives in relation to intersectionality theory, but will focus

on recent research on language, gender and sexuality in social media practices. We will then move on to introduce some current research and recommendations for practice, through discussing a couple of examples from our recent research projects.

CRITICAL ISSUES: INTERSECTIONALITY AS AN APPROACH TO INVESTIGATE THE COMPLEXITY OF IDENTITY WORK

The concept of intersectionality was introduced by the legal studies scholar Crenshaw (1989; 1991) to address the specific positions of Black women whose experiences could not be explained only through the category of gender *or* ethnicity, but through looking at these two identity categories as mutually constitutive of each other. Since the 1980s, the concept of intersectionality has become central in feminist theory and gender and sexuality studies (see McCall 2005). It has also been adopted by language, gender and sexuality researchers (e.g. Levon 2015; Machin, Caldas-Coulthard & Milani 2016; Queen 2014), especially in the field of queer linguistics (see Bucholtz & Hall 2004; Motschenbacher 2011). Intersectionality theory maintains that power relations, constituted in and through socio-cultural categories such as gender, sexuality, race, class, ethnicity and age, do not exist in isolation from each other either in individual people's experiences or as social structures, but co-construct one another in a complex manner. While this premise serves as the starting point of intersectionality perspectives in research, there have been different ways to categorise types of intersections, and various methodological approaches to examine intersectionality in practice.

In the field of sociolinguistics, there are, to date, relatively few studies that utilise an intersectional approach. However, in a sense, sociolinguistics has addressed the intersections of different identities from the beginning. In the classic studies, gender and social class were examined as categories that affect each other and the speakers' output. The necessity to pay

attention to several identity categories at the same time has been part of sociolinguistic studies of gender also later on (see e.g. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1999; Milroy & Milroy 1993). However, especially in variationist sociolinguistics, the different identity categories have been treated as background variables, rather than as something that is situationally constructed through language and other semiotic means. A notable exception is Levon (2015, p. 297–298, italics original) who argues that there are three main principles in intersectionality research that are important for language scholars. These include that 1) ‘*lived experience* is ultimately intersectional in nature’ (cf. Crenshaw 1989, 1991); 2) ‘intersections are *dynamic*, and emerge in specific social, historical and interactional configurations’; and 3) ‘these (dynamic) categories not only intersect but also *mutually constitute* one another’. These basic tenets can lead to diverse approaches, however. Indeed, in terms of methodological approaches, intersectionality theory has been criticised for obscurity and lack of critical discussion of what it actually means to examine the complexity of social identity construction (see Levon 2015). Dealing with the complexity, or all the possible identity categories that may be significant at any given socio-historical context, is more easily said than done.

In her review of (sociological) intersectionality studies, McCall (2005) outlines three main approaches to intersectionality: 1) anticategorical complexity, 2) intracategorical complexity, and 3) intercategorical complexity. The first approach ‘rejects categories’ and aims at deconstructing them to capture the multiplicity, fluidity and complexity of social life (McCall 2005, p. 1773). The second one, intracategorical complexity refers to approaches such as Crenshaw’s (1991) that aims at questioning the boundaries of macro-categories by examining the diversity inside a larger category (e.g. gender) that occurs when other identity categories (e.g. ethnicity) are considered in relation to it (McCall 2005, p. 1774). Finally, approaches to intercategorical complexity do not aim at questioning categories but require ‘that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of

inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions' (McCall 2005, p. 1773).

Our approach falls under the category of anticategorical complexity: we are interested in the complex, often messy and unexpected intersections of gender, sexuality and other identities in social media and the ways in which they tie up with particular identity politics. In this, we also follow Levon's (2015, p. 303) suggestion that analyses of intersectional identity performances should not be done by 'simply adding these other categories into the empirical mix but instead by centring our analyses on the social, historical, ideological, and linguistic relationships between these categories and the different lived articulations of gender and sexuality we study.' What this means in practice is that although we start with certain categories – here, gender and sexuality – we do not approach our data with a checklist of other potentially intersecting categories (e.g. ethnicity, religion, class) but pay attention to those intersections and identities that emerge from the data. That is, we will empirically pay attention to the 'lived articulations of gender and sexuality' that may vary from one social media context to another. In this, we will focus on a range of semiotic resources.

But what exactly are these 'lived articulations' and how can we examine them through a discourse-analytical and ethnographic framework? We suggest that this can be done by focusing on the *performativity* of gendered, sexualised and other identities that can, again, be analysed through the indexicality of language and other semiotic resources. In other words, we will examine how people mobilise different semiotic resources in their presentation of the self and/or others in social media, (cf. Halonen and Leppänen 2017; Lehtonen 2017).

In Butler's (1990, 1993, 2004) theory, performativity refers to the embodied performances of gender and sexuality that through repetition begin to look as if they are natural and self-evident. Apart from embodiment, gender and sexuality are performed through positioning of the self or others in discourse where performativity refers to 'a practice of

improvisation within a scene of constraint' (Butler 2004, p. 2). This echoes the understanding of performance from the perspective of the Goffmanian root metaphor 'life is a stage' (Goffman 1959), according to which all human actions are seen as performances, or presentations of the self, aimed at particular audiences, in particular spatio-temporal settings, and based on particular cultural values, norms, and beliefs. In this respect, social media sites are not unlike a stage in which the performers never know the whole audience but on which they still need to perform in ways that make sense to and are interpretable by their audience.

CURRENT RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In our discussion of the nexus of multimodal participatory cultural practices on social media and intersectionality, we will highlight how, in order to capture the multi-sited and entangled nature of how gender and sexuality are constructed in the lived realities of participants, the analysis needs to rely on insights provided by a range of disciplines. We will illustrate this with the help of examples from our previous studies. The discussion of these examples here only involves certain key observations about them to illustrate the complexity of the multi-semiotic practices that participants rely on in their social media practice— a full analysis of each case would require more space than we have.

However, our analytic approach to the investigation of how participants on social media perform their gendered and sexualised identities involves a number of analytic tasks (see also Leppänen & Kytölä 2016). Firstly, the researcher should carefully contextualise the fan/activity culture in focus socio-culturally. Secondly, to achieve a nuanced understanding of its practices and their meanings to the participants, they need to observe the culture in a systematic ethnographic way. Thirdly, the study needs to involve a close analysis of how social media

participants mobilise particular linguistic and other semiotic resources and how these choices index specific understandings of gender and sexuality. Finally, the study also needs to consider how in their semiotic practice, the participants orient to norms of gender and sexuality, as well as pay attention to the availability of and access to meaning-making resources and the potential inequalities in this.

Doing young alternative masculinity intersectionally

Our first example comes from a Finnish discussion forum for bronies (a blend of ‘brother’ and ‘pony’), that is, young adult male fans of the children’s animated television series *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2011–, from here on MLP). With the help of this example we will illustrate, first, the unexpected social media contexts where gender and sexuality are performed and, second, the complexity of intersecting identity performances, realised through the use of various semiotic resources that index particular meanings and are consequential for the actors’ sense of self and agency in this participatory online culture.

According to Hasbro Studios’ website (2015), the target audience of the MLP series – based on Hasbro’s line of toys – are 4- to 7-year-old girls. Against marketing and cultural expectations, a substantial part of the fans of the series have been young (adult) men, calling themselves bronies (see Lehtonen 2017). Bronies themselves explain their attraction to the series by the ‘soft’ values that it celebrates – friendship and tolerance – and find their fandom (fan community) very supportive; many of them have made long-term investments in building up an active on- and offline community. The fandom has, however, attracted mixed media attention because it challenges hegemonic gender and age discourses: men who admit to liking media products targeted at girls are often met with ridicule (Jones 2015, p. 121), if not

pathologisation. Bronies have inspired ‘antifandom’ practices both online and in traditional media where they are considered disturbing, immature or sexually deviant (Jones 2015). In Finland, the community has been active since 2012 both on- and offline. In the Finnish mainstream media, bronies have been treated as a group that deviates from gendered and aged norms – although they are not represented as disturbing, they are viewed as strange, exceptional or funny (see Lehtonen 2017).

The example is a post in a thread where members of the forum introduce themselves. The poster is an active member of the Finnish brony fandom who was also interviewed for a larger research project on the Finnish bronies (see Lehtonen 2017). At a first look, the post seems like a typical discussion forum post. A lot could be said by merely examining the post as a representative of a certain genre on social media. It has the format of a forum post signalling the title of the thread, the nickname and avatar of the author, the time-stamps and so forth. It is multimodal and involves text, emojis, images, hyperlinks, and an embedded video. It follows the textual genre of the thread – titled *Introduce yourself* – which is a chain of introductions; these introduction threads are typical on discussion forums focusing on shared interests (see Page 2012, p. 31–33). Each post presents the poster, his occupation and hobbies, and his relationship to the MLP television series. However, we will argue that – in terms of gender, sexuality and other intersecting identity categories – it is impossible to understand the meanings constructed in the post without a knowledge of the cultural context of the brony fandom and ethnographic understanding of the shared practices in the Finnish fandom.

Modified, anonymised image of the data excerpt (*Endnote 1*)

Re: Introduce yourself

Author [Nickname](#) » XX.XX.2012 XX:XX

Hello Everypony 🐾 Allll-right, I'm a 21-year-old conscript, and a future student (once again). Where should I start...?

Well, I'm a bit silent and depressive due to my shitty past, and during the past years I've tried to pull myself together, and get to know people with varying success. To register on this site was a big social challenge in itself, but we'll see how it goes. Excluding the previous lines, I'm a fairly happy person, who is always seeking for new things, and tries to see the brighter side of things 🐾

🐾 As a pony I could probably be described as *Fluttershy* and *Pinkie Pie*. I guess...

If someone is familiar with [Helen Fisher's theory of four personality types](#), they'll probably understand me better, because according to the theory I'm a **negotiator/explorer**.

But in my own words: "the world is a curious place". Yes, I find many things interesting, and I'm in the bad habit of getting stuck in exploring things new and exciting. Or then just something that is otherwise interesting. E.g. if I see an interesting article in a magazine, I must read it.

Hobbies: reading (esp. fantasy), drawing (yeah, fantasy and ponies...), cooking, beer tasting (no regular lagers, that is, but different special beers), gaming (RPGs mostly), and obviously pony

activities in different forms. I, for instance, listen to music, draw and read fanfics 🐾

Interests: I love history, and read a lot of it in my freetime. Ufos, conspiracy theories, and everything related. [The Elder Scrolls](#) game series, because it's just so vast and interesting. Then

there are of course ponies and too many other things to mention 🐾

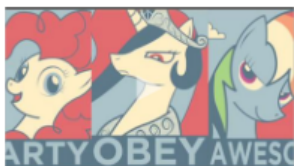
Pony hobby: It started on a normal day some time in 2011. Maybe... Well, anyway, I'd seen avatars, popular pics on boards all over the net earlier, and thought: "What the heck am I seeing?". I didn't get why the series was so popular, and why people loved it. I hated ponies, and thought they were "a little girls' thing", even though *Rainbow Dash* was somehow, well, rather nice looking 🐾

On IRC two people were talking about the latest pony episode, and I was like *wuut?!* They asked me to watch one, and I decided to start from the beginning. The first episode was naturally followed by the second one, so that I could finish the plotline. When I'd watched the two first episodes, I was pondering for a week or two what to think about it. A voice in my head told me

to watch another episode, and then I found myself singing along during the theme song. 🐾

So that's it for now.

My favourite remix [a video on YouTube]:



Pussikalja meet-ups and meet-ups in general since April 2013

A cave master serving [the name of a fan society]



[The full Winds of Change comic](#) [a link to a pony fanfic]



[Nickname](#)
Pegasos

Messages: 2399
Joined: XX.XX.2012
City/town: XXXX

First, the language use in the text indexes identities some of which are also explicitly stated in the post. The poster, for instance, says that he is in the military service and a 21-year-old student. His young adult male identity – opposed to the expected target audience of MLP, young girls – is also signalled by the fairly formal language use with some swear words, as

well as his way of initially distancing himself from the MLP series as a *'little girls' thing'*. In the written text, the unexpectedness of a young adult male's interest in the series is rationalised through various strategies. Being a brony goes against the expectations tied to normative Finnish adult masculinity, especially in its institutionalised forms, such as the compulsory military service, which is commonly described as the rite of passage to manhood. However, the rationalisation is not only necessary in terms of gender and age to explain away the 'girlishness' or 'childishness' of one's interest, but also in terms of sexuality. Although sexuality is nowhere explicitly mentioned, in other contexts bronies have been suspected to represent queerness, non-normative sexualities, or, in the worst cases, paedophilia. This makes sense in the framework of hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity where masculinity itself is defined in opposition to women, children and queers (e.g. Connell 2005). Bronies need to negotiate outsiders' expectations and thus explain their unexpected interest in girls' media franchise by refusing to follow the logic of hegemonic masculinity and by offering alternative motivations for, and ways of doing, brony masculinity.

In our example, the rationalisation happens by relying on two recurring narrative patterns that are circulated widely in the translocal brony community: a trauma narrative and a conversion narrative (Lehtonen 2017). Typically, in the context of brony fandom, the trauma narrative has to do with the poster's past experiences of bullying and depression. Here the poster refers to his *shitty past* right at the beginning. While this kind of trauma narrative occurs in various contexts, in the brony community, through the process of resemiotisation, it is usually also used to explain the writer's interest in girls' media franchise. That is, in the bronies' version of the trauma narrative the television series offers consolation and values, such as friendship and respect for others that have helped the writer deal with his past experiences. In the brony community, the narrative is so typical that the poster does not have explain it in detail – the mere mention of his depressive past at the beginning indexes that he is like others with

similar past narratives who have entered the community. The same concerns the second narrative pattern, the conversion narrative, borrowed from religious contexts but typical also in other fan communities. At the end of the post, the writer explains his ‘conversion’ from a hater into a fan in one paragraph. After watching two episodes of the *‘little girls’ thing* because some of his online friends were also doing this, he was suddenly emotionally hooked, or found himself *singing along during the theme song*. Here the musical and emotional content of the series is marked as significant, although elsewhere the same writer also offers more analytic explanations for why it is that this particular girls’ series is so good (e.g. it has more complex screenwriting than other children’s series).

While the written text thus indexes an adult male rationalising his interest in young girls’ series, the other multisemiotic resources index his fan identity more directly. This fan identity partly draws on resources often used in online communication by young girls: emojis based on an animated series (here ponies), an avatar that is an animated figure (here a pony), simple lines in English borrowed from a television show (*Hello everypony*). However, other resources signal an adult fan identity: the poster’s signature that involves text explaining that he has been participating in *offline ‘pussikalja’ meet-ups* (‘pussikalja’, literally ‘bag beer’ is an informal expression that refers to the activity of buying a bag of beers from a shop and drinking it outside) and includes a banner advertising an offline meet-up. Other hyperlinks indicate his interest in the translocal bronny fandom (a link to an MLP video remix), as well as his identity as a fantasy RPG gamer (a link to the *Elder Scrolls* game franchise). The poster’s pony avatar is a combination of (stereotypically) child and adult things: an animated pony character wearing an army helmet with the acronym N.E.E.T. (not in education, employment or training). On the basis of an interview with the poster, we know that the avatar is his ‘ponysona’ designed by himself that changes in relation to his life events. We should note that the multimodal resources in the post have, in fact, accumulated over time: it is not possible, for instance, that the poster

could have advertised for the offline meet on the date of the original post (other threads reveal that it had not been planned yet). All the profile information also changes constantly; thus, the total number of posts by the poster, listed under the avatar, is from the date of collecting the data (year 2016), not from the original date of the post (2012). While this means that there is no access to the post as it was at the original time of posting, the accumulated resources offer plenty of materials to examine a fan identity performed *through time*, rather than merely in the moment of posting. In sum, looking at the identity performances of the poster by taking into account the ways in which the brony fan identity intersects with gender, sexuality and age is not only necessary in terms of understanding the complex, lived experience of this particular poster but also enables the researcher to move beyond examining the text in terms of polar identity categories (e.g. female-male, feminine-masculine, child-adult, heterosexual-asexual).

Finally, we suggest that an ethnographic understanding of the bronies' fan practices is needed to be able to read all of this as (mainly) sincere and not (merely) ironic. While there are some indications in the language use, namely its sincere tone, as well as in the discursive context – a thread of introductions by participants who wish to join the community – that the post is not meant to be read as ironic, it could be posted by a skilful troll. There are, after all, several memes, that is, images, videos or pieces of texts copied and spread rapidly on the internet that mock the bronies. Obviously, one could analyse the post as a text by a writer whose sincerity cannot be decided: whether sincere or ironic, the gendered and sexualised discourses and multi-semiotic choices in the post can be examined through textual analysis. However, if one wants to analyse the social media practices as people's *lived experiences*, the textual analysis should be supported by ethnographic research. Online ethnography conducted on the discussion forum could already help to contextualise the poster as a member of the community: one would, for instance, find out that he has been very active on the forum (more than 2000 posts over the course of several years), offers support for others, is in friendly terms with

several other members and also active on other online and offline sites of the community (offline fan activities are often documented online, so the researcher does not have to go ‘out’ to the field to be able to access these). All of this supports the reading of his identity performances as sincere. In the case of this participant, however, online ethnography was also supported by an offline interview that brought further light on his fan trajectory and its connections to his everyday life, such as his statement that his avatar’s changing outfits, including the N.E.E.T. helmet, reflect what is actually going on in his life.

Doing migrant masculinity intersectionally

Our second set of examples with which we illustrate multimodal social media practices that are centrally concerned with performing, sharing and interrogating identities intersectionally are short entertaining, often explicitly parodic, videos by young Finland-based migrant men. These are disseminated via video sharing platforms, such as YouTube and Vimeo, where they are also discussed and debated by diverse audiences. These videos are part of a popular trend whereby social media serve as a popular ‘stage’ for lay and celebrity performances as well as ‘a virtual lounge’ for audience reactions to and evaluations of these performances (Marwick and boyd 2011). On video sharing platforms, such as YouTube, performances are disseminated for appreciative audiences who, in turn, take up what is being performed in discussions and debates, but also in replications and recontextualisations of different kinds and degrees of appreciation and criticality (Häkkinen and Leppänen, 2014). Platforms like YouTube are thus not simply media in which people watch videos, listen to music, broadcast their own videos but they also serve as a forum for participatory cultures, cultural niches and memes.

Multi-sited ethnographic observations have shown that for migrants, video sharing social media have become a means of reaching audiences beyond their locality and immediate

social circles. For many of them, their mediated performances have proved an important means for establishing their identity and for generating more followers and fans (Westinen, 2017; Leppänen and Westinen, 2018). Social media performances are also something that the performers can themselves monitor, and thus they provide them with an opportunity to a voice that can have considerable reach and potential in terms of audience engagement.

Typically, the videos feature everyday happenings, such as driving a car, talking with one's mother, or having an argument with a girlfriend. They are always to some extent scripted mono- or dialogic performances. Technically, they are shot with a smartphone or a video camera, after which they are usually (moderately) edited, and sometimes complemented with special effects, such as sounds, music, animation and subtitles. The language used in them is most often Finnish, although they can also include English, as well as snippets of other languages. The varied language choices of the videos show, in fact, that they are not aimed at particular migrant groups, but at more mixed audiences including ethnic Finns as well as other migrants who are Finnish- and English-speaking.

As multimodal productions the videos call for detailed and multifaceted analysis that can describe the ways in which the modes drawn on in them – varied language resources, embodied performances, cinematic representation, music, for example – are coordinated and integrated to create coherent narrative performances. As highlighted in interviews with creators of these videos, for both themselves and their audiences the crafted multimodal narratives serve as entertainment and critical commentary: through humour and disparagement, they depict ways in which migrants are treated by the host society, as well as how migrants themselves strive to make sense of the host society

A very typical strategy that the video performances apply to achieve these effects is double voicing (Bakhtin, 1984). In concrete terms, this means that the narratives are presented from the perspective of young migrant men, pretending not to be young migrant men. For

example, in one video (Endnote2), entitled ‘A migrant who thinks he is a Finn’ a young Iraqi migrant, with the artist name Kilikali, gives a parodic performance of ethnic Finnish masculinity. The video depicts Kilikali driving his car and giving an impassioned speech in Finnish on how Finland – that has recently received unprecedented numbers of migrants and refugees – is being invaded by foreigners who ‘steal our women’ and ‘fill our country’ so that there is ‘no space left for us anymore’. In this way, his speech takes up recognisable themes of the racist and populist discourses circulating in Finnish society at the moment, and recontextualises them as part of his parodic-critical performance of ethnic Finnish masculinity. In addition, his exaggerated (‘stylised’, Coupland 2007) way of speech functions as an index of Finnishness: it flows effortlessly and idiomatically in a fluent eastern Finnish dialect – a dialect typically associated with a traditional lifestyle. At the same time, the embodied style Kilikali has chosen for himself in the video, the sunglasses hiding his eyes and the military-style jacket, for example, emphasise the fact that he is not an authentic Finn.



The video thus gives us a parodic performance of a stereotypical social persona, that of a traditional heterosexual Finnish man. It borrows his voice, thus crossing over to a habitus and

style that are generally not taken to belong to people such as the migrant author of the video. Thus, the video performance portrays to its audiences a double-voiced, intersectional identity: migrant and non-migrant; non-Finnish and Finnish; Finnish-speaking and non-Finnish speaking; non-racist and racist; critical and humorous.

Other examples that rely on a similar double-voiced strategy are videos that give us (drag) performances of Finnish women, such as the one by an Angolan migrant man, who has adopted Bianca Sossu as his artist name:



This video, ‘When you are trying to teach the language of Finland to your refugee boyfriend’, features the character of Bianca Sossu engaged in dialogue with her refugee boyfriend. In it, Bianca is presented as the Finnish L1 speaker instructing the boyfriend on how to say in Finnish ‘I love you’ (‘Minä rakastan sinua’). Like the previous example, this performance, too, mobilizes a range of semiotic resources. These include, for example, Bianca’s didactic use of vernacular Finnish - the character’s expertise in Finnish is used to suggest that the performance is essentially about Finnishness. In addition, Bianca’s embodied performance in the video as a blond Finnish woman can be interpreted as indexing a particular kind of young white Finnish woman, a bold and frivolous ‘pissis’ girl (Halonen and Leppänen 2017), located at a particular

intersection of gender, age, race, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality. Finally, in the same way as the previous example, the video also includes snippets of recognisable populist and racist slogans (e.g. ‘in Finland we don’t beat up women’; ‘you are going back to your country’). These are recontextualised as part of this performance of gendered Finnishness, in order to drive home a humorous and critical commentary of the racist and xenophobic discourses currently mushrooming in public debates and discourses in Finnish society.

In sum, both videos tell multimodal narratives of selves and their ethnic Finnish others at the intersection of categories - race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and ethnicity, most significantly. While they are humorous in nature, they are also deeply critical in how they transgressively make visible and engage with particular norms, distinctions and relations in power related to the lived realities of migrant men: what and who they may and can be in the often hostile host society which projects onto them various forms of otherness, dangerousness and threat.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As both the intersectionality research in sociolinguistics and discourse studies, as well as the research on multimodal gendered and sexualised identity practices on social media are fairly recent fields of study, more research is called for in the future. Our own research has focused on voluntary, participatory social media practices that often involve conscious norm-breaking both in terms of identity discourses and the use of linguistic and semiotic resources (e.g. Lehtonen 2015, 2017; Leppänen 2008, 2011; Leppänen and Häkkinen 2012; Halonen and Leppänen 2017). Future research could look at social media contexts where people are more inclined to follow norms, rather than challenge them. A particularly interesting example could

be social media activities involving explicit relationship work, such as guidance and advice sites and online dating services (see e.g. Herring and Kapidzic 2015; Milani 2013; Kohler Mortensen 2017). Moreover, attention could be paid to how intersectional identity performances are both carried out and reflexively made sense of in interactions among social media participants. In particular, it is a timely topic to investigate the various forms of disparagement and policing that are targeted at particular individuals and groups and that can have serious consequences for those zoomed on. These can sometimes take elaborate forms of multimodal crafting, recontextualisation and resemiotisation, and become widely influential and virally spreading memes. Examples of these include social media campaigns focusing on public persona such as politicians, civil servants and journalists in which their credibility is attacked and ridiculed; as well as the abundant racist and populist memic discourses about the other - refugees and migrants, for example - widely circulating and multiplying in social media.

NOTES

(1) This is a modified image of the post. For privacy and copyright reasons the original screenshots of the brony sites cannot be used. All the examples in the text are English translations of the Finnish originals.

(2) The authors of the videos have given SL their permission to include links to their videos, to show screenshots of them, and to refer to their verbatim discourse, in public presentations and publications discussing their work.

FURTHER READING

Machin, D., Caldas-Coulthard, C. and Milani, T. (2016) ‘Doing critical multimodality in research on gender, language and discourse’, *Gender and Language*, 10(3), pp. 301–308.

- The paper discusses multimodal work in the area of gender, language and discourse, and proposes the kinds of multimodal approaches that are most appropriate for this task.

Leppänen, Sirpa, Westinen, Elina & Samu Kytölä (eds) 2017. *Social Media Discourse, (Dis)identifications and Diversities*, New York: Routledge.

- The introductory chapter gives an overview of recent work in the sociolinguistic work on identity work on social media as well as discusses key concepts and approaches in this. Many of the chapters exemplify an intersectional take on identity as well as different approaches to multimodal analysis of social media discourse.

Levon, E. (2015) ‘Integrating Intersectionality in Language, Gender and Sexuality Research’, *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 9(7), pp. 295–308.

- Levon’s article gives a useful introduction to how intersectionality can be integrated in sociolinguistic research on language, gender and sexuality.

RELATED TOPICS

Discourse organisation of gender ideology

Digital ethnography

Communities of practice

Applying queer theory

Introduction to poststructuralist methodologies

Analysing gender online

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