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***Social media discourse, (dis)identifications and diversities***

Sirpa Leppänen, Elina Westinen & Samu Kytölä (Eds.)

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## **Introduction: social media discourse, (dis)identifications and diversities**

Sirpa Leppänen, Samu Kytölä, Elina Westinen & Saija Peuronen

The focus in this volume is on *social media discourse, (dis)identifications and diversities*. It demonstrates how particular ways of mobilizing verbal, discursive and other semiotic resources serve as means for identity work (Bucholtz, 2003; Blommaert, 2003), involving acts, processes and practices of (dis)identification as essential aspects of sociality in social media. It will also illustrate how such social action also increasingly engages with a range of diversities in social media.

In this introductory chapter we present the focus and aims of this volume and introduce the case studies included in it. In addition, we clarify the key coordinates of this research. First, we describe the sociolinguistic and discourse-ethnographic approach taken in this book to the investigation of social media discourse practice. Second, we discuss social media as informal and interest-driven activity spaces (Leppänen, Kytölä, Jousmäki, Peuronen, & Westinen, 2014) with their emergent orders of normativity (Silverstein, 1976; Blommaert, 2010; Varis & Wang, 2011) in which social media participants, drawing on particular semiotic resources and in the context of specific activities and interactions, engage with (dis)identification. Third, we review the ways in which identity and identity work have been theorized and investigated in previous language-oriented work on social media activities and interactions, and, with the help of recent critical discussion of identity theory, give an overall idea of the dimensions involved in identity work in social media, emphasizing its basis in the choices human actors make, under particular situated sociocultural, discursive and normative conditions, and the multiple dimensions and scales (potentially) involved in identity work. Fourth, this chapter discusses how, like identity, diversity can also be seen as a complex and multifaceted notion that ranges from the diversity of communicative sites and contexts, to participants and their activities, interactions and communicative repertoires and resources. Our discussion of these three key theoretical coordinates of the volume will help the reader to place the empirical cases presented in the book, along with their takes on social media, identity work and diversity, within the conceptual space they demarcate. Finally, we highlight the general ethical guidelines in research on social media.

## **The volume in a nutshell**

In this volume, we argue that, whereas there is a growing body of sociolinguistic studies focusing on identity in the globalizing late modern world (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou, 2003; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Blommaert, 2005; Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2008), identity is also a timely topic in the specific context of digital social media. While acknowledging that the digital divide is still very much a global reality, with the majority of the world's population living without the internet and thus without social media (P. Norris, 2001; Schradie, 2011), this volume argues that for a large portion of the world's population(1) social media serve as important sites for everyday life, as ways of 'being in the world', interacting with others, sharing and organizing information and collaboratively constructing culture, both in ways that resemble and intertwine with ways predating and spanning the internet, and in completely new ways.

Broadly, the volume approaches the study of social media from the perspectives of sociolinguistics and discourse-ethnographic studies. In doing so, it contributes to an emergent tradition of language and literacy oriented research in which identity work is increasingly a key topic (see e.g. Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011a; Tannen & Trester, 2013; Barton & Lee, 2013; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014a). In this research domain, identity work in social media is also beginning to be acknowledged as 'normal' and mundane practice, instead of as something exceptional, exotic or particular to only specific social or age groups, as was sometimes the case in the early days of internet research (see Crystal, 2004; Herring, 2008).

This volume will show, first, how social media participants, via multi-semiotic and discursive means, engage in identity work in the socio-cultural contexts of particular social media, networks, affinity groups or communities of practice. As will be explained in more detail below, such identity work can, theoretically, involve a number of different kinds of processes and practices (and their combinations), each of which relate to particular possibilities and ways of understanding, orienting to, and constructing 'identity'. These possibilities and ways can be clarified with reference to the critical revision of recent identity theories suggested by Brubaker and Cooper (2000, pp. 17–20), the main aspects of which are the following:

- categorical and/or relational identification of oneself and/or others by oneself/others,

- categorical and/or relational disidentification of oneself and/or others by oneself/others
- self-understanding and social location,
- commonality, connectedness and/or groupness.

Such a multi-dimensional framework is helpful in conceptualizing the possibilities of and choices made in identity work in social media. As shown below, it also provides us with a useful perspective from which to pinpoint and discuss the particular orientations taken in the individual studies included in this volume, and thus highlight the particular dimensions of identity work they analytically focus on.

Second, another key aim of the volume, and a theme running through all of the empirical cases included in it, is *diversities*. In this volume, diversity is approached as a complex, plural notion that involves social diversity as well as linguistic and semiotic diversity – diversity of participants, diversity in identity work in, between and across social formations, and diversity of resources of expression, communication and action. Diversity is thus seen as something pertaining to contexts, individuals and groups, as well as to discourse and social practice. Diversity can also involve the kind of complexity that has recently been characterized as superdiversity (Blommaert, 2015; Meissner, 2015; Arnaut, 2012/2016).

The twelve case studies included in this volume focus on different social media contexts involving participants from different corners of the world and exemplifying diverse online activities and interactions. These studies will tease out some of the particularities with which participants in social media verbalize and visualize themselves and others into being as particular kinds of social actors with particular kinds of social connections, allegiances and affinities. While doing so, the contributions in this book also demonstrate the value and efficacy of their analytic tools and methods, provided by sociolinguistics, ethnography, discourse studies, and the study of multimodality, and the ways in which these offer the kind of precision and sensitivity needed for a nuanced description of the semiotic resources mobilized in identity work in social media and the meanings they help to generate.

## The twelve case studies in this book

This volume is organized into two main sections. The first part is labeled “Identifications and disidentifications with others” and the second one “Identifications of the self”, according to the primary focus of their analyses of identity work.

Part 1 begins with an exploration of a transgressive gender category by **Halonen and Leppänen**. Their focus is on social media as sites for constructing, negotiating and contesting gender and sexuality. Drawing on fictional short stories aimed at girls and young women as their data, they analyze the intricate ways in which the stories construct and critically investigate the category of the so called ‘pissis’ girls, a particular version of ‘bad young femininity’ in contemporary Finland. Their analysis shows how the discursive strategy of excess is used as a means for conducting nuanced socio-cultural analysis and for both identifying with and disidentifying from the social category.

In his chapter, **Kytölä** examines popular discourses on nationalism in the context of web forum discussions of men’s national football teams, and that of Finland in particular. He focuses on the ‘banal nationalist’ tradition of the playback and singing of national anthems before international football matches, exploring the discursive and semiotic strategies online discussants draw on to categorize, represent and contest nationalism. His analysis shows how ambivalent stances emerge among football followers on the different aspects of ethnic diversification of national teams in a culture characterized by growing mobility and diversity. Moreover, he addresses the ways in which football followers utilize ambivalent sarcasm, satire and jocularly in their identification and disidentification processes pertaining to diversifying national teams and even particular players with multi-ethnic family backgrounds and transcultural life histories.

The chapter by **Zhukova Klausen** deals with the complexity of transnational belonging in a Denmark-based Russian-speaking discussion forum. Guided by its orientation to (dis)identification as *subjectivation*, the chapter looks at how diverse discursive and semiotic resources mediate identification and disidentification practices through which belonging is constructed. It examines ways in which participants in computer-mediated social interaction mobilize, on the one hand, psy(chology) discourses and practices that construct transnational

living as problematic, and, on the other hand, resist this kind of problematization and refuse to identify themselves with the proposed transnational subjectivity.

**Van Nuenen** and **Varis** investigate the practices whereby a popular, professional American travel blogger is assigned with an expert identity. Looking at the construction of expertise both algorithmically and discursively, their analysis shows how the blogger's identity is a discursive composite of two roles – that of a travel expert and of a life coach. Further, they demonstrate how the 'enregisterment' of expertise can be usefully conceptualized and analyzed in terms of the Goffmanian notion of 'team', whereby identity construction can be seen as a 'team effort' to which not only the travel blogger but also his blogger peers and his varied audiences contribute.

The chapter by **Bortoluzzi** discusses practices and processes of self- and other-(dis)identification in the context of online popular forensics relating to a recent murder case in Italy. Using participant interviews as her material, the author concentrates on analyzing how social media participants, sharing the belief that the murder suspects were innocent, engaged in processes of identifying themselves as members of what became to be seen as a 'pro-innocent' community, as well as disidentified themselves from those who took the opposite view, the 'pro-guilt' community. Of particular interest in the study are the discursive formulations of empathy and dyspathy that contribute to these processes, and the intricate ways in which these are enacted both online and offline.

To conclude the first part, **Georgakopoulou** investigates two sets of data, one featuring the interactions of an ethnically and linguistically diverse group of young Facebook friends, and the other YouTube commentaries on a spoof video based on an incident of a male politician attacking two female MPs, originally shown live in Greek TV news. In focus in her analysis are processes of alignment at the intersection of social media users' interactional practices and the affordances of participation offered by social media. Drawing on small stories analysis and the study of interaction, she focuses on two systematic interactional patterns of doing alignment, ritual appreciation and knowing participation. Overall, her findings advance our understanding of how participants manage social relations of (dis)identification in the interplay between media affordances, actual communication choices and participation frameworks.

The second part of the book “Identifications of the self” begins with a chapter by **Tagg and Seargeant**. Drawing on a questionnaire-based survey of Facebook users as their data, the authors examine the extent to which people’s online identifications are shaped by the social roles they inhabit offline, as well the extent to which they are aware of the likely trajectories and potential accessibility of their postings, and thus which social roles they deem relevant in the online context. The chapter thus highlights how offline social roles are made relevant in social media contexts as an interactional resource for identity work and relationship building as well as how users’ perceptions of their roles (and the social expectations which typically accompany them) may potentially shape or constrain what they post and how they manage their online communication.

The chapter by **Georgalou** looks at the role of time and temporality in identification in social media interaction. More specifically, in a case study, based on a more extensive discourse-ethnographic investigation of Greek Facebook users, she examines how the user discursively constructs himself as a “chronological being”, positions himself vis-à-vis time and makes aspects of time relevant in his Facebook interactions. On the basis of her analysis, Georgalou argues that the construction of age and time identity is essentially an interactive and collaborative task and that identifications with cultural elements, such as music, constitute powerful indices of affiliation, belonging, commonality, alignment, and groupness.

Age identification is also central in **Nishimura’s** chapter. With the help of both a corpus-based analysis of pronominal choices and a close qualitative linguistic and textual analysis, including features associated with ‘role language’, the author examines blogs by senior Japanese men and women. While positing that two conceptual identities – the blogger and the character – are relevant in the analysis of such blogs, the author demonstrates diversity in blogging styles, highlighting how both gender and age have an impact on the particular ways in which senior bloggers compose their texts.

**Lehtonen** also engages with questions of gender and age. Her particular focus is on the close analysis of stories by Finnish ‘bronies’ (a portmanteau of ‘brother’ and ‘pony’), adult young men who are interested in the *My Little Pony* franchise and find it important for their identity construction. She examines the intersections of gender, sexuality and age in these fans’ brief life narratives posted on a discussion forum, and argues that, while bronies do gender in non-normative ways in the context of social media, age and sexuality should also be mapped in

order understand the overall picture. Her discussion showcases that, despite their shared bronxyhood and fandom, the participants also exhibit a great deal of diversity in their identification processes.

Focusing on YouTube instructional videos on Pidgin (Hawai'i Creole) and Konglish (Korean English), **Higgins, Furukawa** and **Lee** explore the production of social media content to find out whether and to what degree social media can provide new affordances for representing, and valorizing sociolinguistic diversity by studying how video producers (dis)identify with mainstream metapragmatic messages, or ideological statements about language. On the basis of their analysis they argue that the videos end up legitimizing these two marginalized and stigmatized languages as linguistic systems in their own right, and challenging the valorization of mainstream varieties of hegemonic languages, thereby contributing to the value accorded to multilingualism.

In the final chapter of the volume, **Westinen** explores the multisemiotic and polycentric construction of the self as Other in social media, in the specific context of Finnish hip hop. By drawing on Finnish rap music videos by artists of immigrant origin as data, she discusses the ways in which these 'Black' artists and entertainers negotiate their role in society, and in the hip hop scene, through various (dis)identification processes, some of which draw on (yet also run counter to) 'traditional' identity categories such as ethnicity, and on gendered and racialized stereotypes of 'Black', African men to raise awareness and tolerance, thereby exhibiting an 'in-your-face' type of Otherness.

### **A sociolinguistic and discourse-ethnographic approach to digital discourse**

The vantage point taken in this volume and its case studies can be broadly defined as a sociolinguistic and discourse-ethnographic approach to digital discourse. Such an approach has been highlighted in online-ethnographic work, where we can see a shift from solely medium-related research, focusing on the technologies, software, platforms and sites to user-related approaches, to what people *actually do* – *why* and *how* they adopt and appropriate linguistic, semiotic and discursive resources, and *what* discursive and socio-cultural *meanings and effects* are generated thereby. The specific sociolinguistic orientation in such studies is manifest in the close attention they pay to the emergence and situated use of particular linguistic and discursive resources in social action and interaction in the context of specific

affinity spaces and communities, and the social meanings and norms of language use (see e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2008; Kytölä & Androutsopoulos, 2012; Leppänen & Peuronen 2012; Stæhr, 2014).

For most of the chapters, their discourse-ethnographic orientation involves an engagement in focused, systematic and long-term online observation and analysis of social media participants' linguistic, semiotic and other discursive choices and patterns in the context of their activities and interactions in digital settings for the purposes of describing and explaining the social meanings, identities and relations constructed in and via these. In their own ways, the case studies in this volume highlight and testify to the value of investigating social media discourse practice as an important topic in ethnographic research. All except three of the contributions do this via detailed qualitative analysis of the semiotic and discursive choices and patterns made in the social medium under investigation. In two cases (the questionnaire study on Facebook 'behavior' by Seargeant & Tagg and the interview study on the identification processes of the online community by Bortoluzzi), the main focus is, in turn, on the participant views and evaluations of identity work in social media communication. In addition, in one study (Nishimura), qualitative analysis of discourse is complemented by corpus analysis.

However, as is the case in online ethnography more generally (see Androutsopoulos, 2008; Varis, 2016), this volume also underlines the importance of investigation into the connections between and interfaces of digital (online) and 'otherwise mediated' (offline) discourse. While close and detailed analyses of online data continue to be a worthwhile target of investigation, of equal importance are the polycentric, transmedial aspects of ethnographic research that follows actors and their communicative practices across online and offline spaces (see Androutsopoulos, 2015, on 'blended ethnography'; see Marcus, 1998, and Stæhr, 2014, on 'multi-sited ethnography'; for an overview on approaches in digital ethnography, see Varis, 2016). Indeed, social media "may constitute only one of the settings in which the participants or groups engage in shared activities – online activities may intertwine with their activities in offline contexts" (Leppänen et al., 2014). Such fluid connections between online and offline activities are nowadays seen as important in digital media research and have been called for by many scholars (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2008; Barton & Lee, 2013, pp. 178–183; Leppänen et al., 2014; Androutsopoulos & Juffermans, 2014b; Stæhr, 2015; Kytölä, 2016, Peuronen, forthcoming).

Although sociolinguistics, ethnography and (different approaches to) discourse studies feature strongly in the volume, many studies also draw on insights provided by other fields. Significantly, many address identity work in social media as something that encompasses the use of diverse semiotic resources (see the chapters by Westinen, Georgalou, and van Nuenen & Varis, in particular). Thus, in the same way as in other recent language-oriented studies on digital media (e.g. Barton & Lee, 2013; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014a; see also Page, 2016), another key emphasis in this book is that the language of social media is defined in a broad, inclusive way. To this end, the book highlights the importance of other modalities, besides the verbal, in the study of social media discourse and shows how social media participants draw on and mobilize complex *multi-semioticity* – combinations of specialized sets of linguistic features (associated with different languages or varieties), discursive resources (such as genre, register and style), pictures, moving image, sound and music, layout and composition (Scollon & LeVine, 2004; S. Norris, 2004; Jones, 2005; Kress, 2010; Leppänen et al., 2014).

Other fields drawn on in the studies reported in this book include anthropology (in several chapters), gender and intersectionality studies (Halonen & Leppänen, Lehtonen, Westinen), queer linguistics (Lehtonen), philosophy (Georgalou, Georgakopoulou), social/discursive psychology (Bortoluzzi, Georgakopolou), tourism studies (van Nuenen & Varis), hip hop studies (Westinen) and sociology (Kytölä; van Nuenen & Varis). This kind of interdisciplinarity is in itself an indication of the ways in which identification and diversity in social media ‘happen’ in complex semiotic and mediated ways, necessitating a multi-dimensional theory-as-method approach (see also Leppänen & Kytölä, in press). It also highlights how scholars, in order to understand and explain the complexity of these processes and practices in social media, clearly feel the need to look beyond the frameworks of language-centered study only.

### **In focus: Social media**

As a notion ‘social media’ is relatively new, but it has quickly become a buzzword in public discussions. A benchmark definition of social media is the one by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61), who describe them as “[a group of] internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and

exchange of User Generated Content”. In this definition, ‘Web 2.0’ (since about 2004) denotes platforms “whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (ibid., p. 61), whereas ‘User Generated Content’ (since about 2005) is digital discourse “published either on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site accessible to a selected group of people; [showing] a certain amount of creative effort; [...] created outside of professional routines and practices” (ibid., p. 61). Along the lines suggested by Kaplan and Haenlein, in this volume we also adopt a broad view of social media and regard these as media designed for and/or adopted for social interaction (see also Leppänen, Kytölä, Jousmäki, Peuronen, & Westinen, 2013; Leppänen et al., 2014; Baym, 2011; Fornäs, Klein, Ladendorf, Sundén, & Svehligsson, 2002).

Various types of digitally mediated social media are investigated in the twelve cases featured in this volume. These include websites, applications and online platforms that, via the internet and with the help of digital devices such as computers and smartphones (mobile phones with an efficient internet connection and typically a touchscreen interface), enable interaction between individuals and groups, and the exchange of discourse material (such as text, pictures, videos, hyperlinks or other semiotic resources) between them, as well as with communities and individuals who use such media.

More specifically, the present contributions mainly focus on social media, such as discussion fora, blogs, sites devoted to sharing short fictional or semi-fictional stories, social network sites and YouTube, which gained their mass popularity in the first decade of the millennium and continue to be popular in the 2010s. Importantly, as highlighted in the case studies, the different social media (platforms) providing the discourse data for detailed investigation offer very different affordances for participation (and impose different constraints), including for identity work. However, these affordances do not necessarily straitjacket the actions of participants, who may also adopt and appropriate media (platforms) for their own (playful or critical) purposes (see e.g. Higgins, Furukawa & Lee; and Georgakopoulou in this volume).

Moreover, all of the contributions investigate asynchronous digital discourse – i.e. discourse that is not necessarily produced on the spur of the moment but which can involve different degrees of planning and revising, and that is technically available for later viewing for an undefined period. Its asynchronous nature may also lead to more complex rhetorical, stylistic

and content crafting than is typical in synchronous digital discourse. This, in turn, may also have implications for identity work: in asynchronous digital discourse participants may be more conscious and careful in designing and metapragmatically framing and/or commenting on their cues for (dis)identifications and (dis)alignments than in synchronous discourse, which, in contrast, might elicit ‘more spontaneous’ bursts of (dis)identification and (dis)alignment.

The focus on asynchronous and more established social media in the studies reported in this volume also means that they exclude the most recent social media platforms (such as Instagram, Whatsapp, Snapchat, or Tumblr) that since 2010 have gained popularity with the increasing use of smartphones (see Martin, 2014). Analogously, none of the contributors have collected their data on social media activities (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) from small screen devices (e.g. smartphones or tablets), but from computer-based applications. The absence of data collected from mobile platforms may be considered a limitation in this volume – but, as a limitation, it is also clearly an indication of the challenges constantly facing social media researchers. The pace of both technological development and the ways in which users of these technologies actually engage with them is so swift that research, by necessity, is often several steps behind. However, despite this lack of attention to the most recent technologies and platforms, it should be recalled that in the kind of sociolinguistic and discursive analyses exemplified in this volume the emphasis is, not on technologies as such, but on providing nuanced analysis of mediated communicative action and interaction as contingent, and as situationally and contextually negotiated.

### **Computer-mediated communication and identity: Review of previous studies**

While this volume breaks new ground in exploring the connections between social media (dis)identifications and diversities, it is highly relevant to acknowledge the foundations on which it is built (see also Herring, 2011, pp. 345–346). Although human-computer interaction has even longer research roots in history, social-scientific and humanities scholarship on computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general did not take flight until the early 1990s. Early CMC formats, and thus the foci of CMC research, included for example, newsgroups, mailing lists, online marketplace interactions, computer conferencing, and internet relay chats (for a relatively early overview, see Herring, 1996).

Subsequent foci in CMC research included, for instance, web fora and blogs (also explored in this volume), LiveJournal, as well as comments sections of edited websites such as newspapers. Importantly for the volume at hand, sociolinguistic research on CMC in English began to expand from English/Anglo-American dominated contexts to multilingual ones, or to digital environments where other languages than English are used (Danet & Herring, 2003, 2007; Androutsopoulos, 2006b, 2007; Tsiplakou, 2009; Barton & Lee, 2013, pp. 44–54; Lee, 2014; for recent overviews, see Leppänen & Peuronen, 2012; Lee, 2016). A few precursors notwithstanding (notably SixDegrees 1997–2000; see boyd & Ellison, 2007), social network(ing) sites can be seen to have emerged in the early 2000s. As an exemplary discussion, boyd and Ellison (2007) explore the emergence of, and similarities and differences between what they identify as three key social network sites: Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook.

With respect to identity research, an early milestone in the digital age is Turkle (1995), who was one of the first scholars to recognize “fluid and multiple” identities online (*ibid.*, p. 49), arguing that “simulations” on the internet cause an “identity crisis” (*ibid.*, pp. 255–270) for people in virtual realities who adopt “...different characters and genders, moving from window to window on the computer screen” (*ibid.*, p. 174). As evident from these quotations, Turkle mainly analyzes virtual role playing games, where aspects of multiple identities are perhaps even more prevalent than in social media at large. Further, Turkle argues that “more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated” (*ibid.*, p. 180). In hindsight, more than two decades later when identity negotiation and play have become much more commonplace, we can appreciate the novelty and preoccupation with something very new and exciting in Turkle’s analysis.

The view of online identities as fluid and multiple simulations, as suggested by Turkle, has remained a recurrent topic in subsequent research. For example, Georgakopoulou (2003, 2006) notes that besides the informational functions of CMC, scholarship should also focus on the “playful identity performances for which it is used” (see also Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011b, p. xxi). This idea has recently been extended by for example Deumert (2014b, pp. 119–120), who draws attention to the unexpected and creative, the aesthetic and playful dimensions of diversity in online contexts, “its potential for change as well as its

entanglement in long-standing discourses of Otherness” (see also Deumert, 2014a). Such an emphasis on the jocularity and playfulness of online communication has indeed been an emergent theme, as also illustrated by several of the contributions in this volume (see e.g. Westinen; Kytölä; Halonen & Leppänen; Georgakopoulou, and Higgins, Furukawa & Lee). Importantly, these studies also note the coexistence and interplay of playfulness with more serious interaction.

A benchmark publication on the sociolinguistics of digital discourse, the volume edited by Thurlow and Mroczek (2011a), contains several chapters that discuss identity. For instance, Vaisman (2011) focuses on Israeli teenage girls’ employment of discursive repertoires and stylization of their online gender identities (cf. the analyses of constructions of gender by Halonen & Leppänen; and Lehtonen in this volume), while Peuronen (2011) analyzes the translocal, heteroglossic use of linguistic and discursive repertoires by Finnish Christians doing extreme sports. Identity construction online is also discussed by Newon (2011; on the multimodal aspects of online role-playing game players’ competitive (expert) identity), by Thurlow and Jaworski (2011; on the ‘staging’ and performance of complex tourist identities in the online photo-sharing site Flickr), and by Androutsopoulos (2011, pp. 284–286), who links online stylizations of identity to older, pre-digital forms of identity stylization (see also Lee, 2014, for a comparison of language choices and identity performances in social media with older similar practices in traditional media).

Identity in digital texts and practices is also discussed in Barton and Lee’s (2013) monograph on online language use. Expanding on earlier research on the connection between multilingual language use and identities online, they posit that language choices and code-switching in different facets of a person’s online behavior can be interpreted as illustrating different aspects of their identities, their perceived or desired social positioning (*ibid.*, pp. 55–68). They also argue that while some aspects of identities can be relatively difficult to change, other aspects are more dynamic and fluid, showing how online worlds yield various affordances for the display and construction of multiple identities. Among the key issues Barton and Lee (2013) raise for the study of online identity construction are the centrality of language, or linguistic resources, representation of the self in online spaces, stance-taking, alignment and acts of positioning. Exploring the degree to which online identities are extension of offline identities (*ibid.*, pp. 80–81), they highlight that multiple identities online are often simultaneously local and global, or ‘glocal’ (pp. 82–84). Tannen and Trester (2013)

is another recent edited volume with chapters on different aspects of digital discourse in the 21st century; a few of the chapters therein address questions of identity. Notably, Androutsopoulos (2013) discusses ‘participatory spectacles’, expressions of local and ‘authentic’ identities in German dialects in dubbed YouTube videos and their comments sections, whereas Mahay (2013) explores the construction of social identity in customized holiday cards online in relation to class, status and elite mobility. Lee (2013) describes the connections between self-identification as an L2 English user and self-deprecating comments on one’s own English in the photo sharing site Flickr (see also Lee, 2014). As a methodological insight, Lee utilized a combination of digital discourse analysis and interviews with social media (Flickr) users.

A number of papers in Androutsopoulos and Juffermans’ (2014a) special issue on digital language practices in superdiversity address issues of identity. They draw attention to ways in which digital language practices “extend and complicate the semiotic resources available to people for their performance of identities and social relationships” (Androutsopoulos & Juffermans, 2014b, p. 5), reminding us on how digital language (and literacy) practices should not be seen as separable from everyday life with language in superdiverse societies (ibid.). In that special issue, empirical foci range from the identity work of Dutch–Chinese youth *vis-à-vis* their Chinese heritage (Juffermans, Blommaert, Kroon, & Li, 2014), the performance of glocal social identities with *manga* cartoon art by multi-ethnic Swedish adolescents (Jonsson & Muhonen, 2014), and sociolinguistic identities in an intercultural, multilingual Facebook group associated with Luxembourg (Belling & de Bres, 2014). In the same issue, Heyd (2014) is a key contribution for two different reasons: methodologically, it utilizes corpus-linguistic methods and ‘big data’ (a 17-million-token longitudinal corpus) – a rare choice in research on identity in CMC – while empirically it investigates racial and ethnic identity construction and ethnolinguistic repertoires in a Nigerian (including diasporic Nigerian) web forum.

Another important precursor to the present volume is the collection by Seargeant and Tagg (2014a), inasmuch its first part (including five chapters) is specifically framed as “the performance of identity on social media”. In that volume, we (Leppänen et al., 2014) outlined how entextualization and resemiotization can be useful concepts for the analysis of current social media discourses, thus anticipating one of the foci of the present volume, viz. multi-semioticity as a resource in identity work (see also Leppänen et al., 2013). Emphasizing the

presence of identity work in contemporary social media activities, Seargeant and Tagg (2014b) also direct the discussion towards ‘identities’ in the plural (ibid., p. 6), thus anticipating the move advanced in the present volume towards the even more dynamic notion of (dis)identification. Importantly, they note that performances of identity online can be “constrained by the perceived nature of the online audience” (ibid., p. 8), and that we should focus our attention on the intersections of identity work and *authenticity* online (see also Leppänen, Møller, & Nørreby, 2015). Page (2014), too, participates in that debate by analyzing the connections between authenticity, identity work and ‘impersonation’ on social network sites (academics on Twitter; students on Facebook). Importantly for the present volume, Seargeant and Tagg note that “identity performance cannot be discussed in isolation from the communities with which individuals align themselves and the ways in which those communities establish and maintain the relationships that comprise them” (2014b, p. 9). Empirical foci in that volume range from coffee fanatics’ social identity, alignment and online descriptions of coffee consumption patterns on Twitter (Zappavigna, 2014), and political activism and the multimodal performance of collective (Liverpool FC) football fandom (Monaghan, 2014; cf. Kytölä, 2012, 2014a, this volume) to the tension between past-oriented ‘narrative identities’ and future-oriented, playful ‘ludic identities’ (Deumert, 2014a), and the connections between humor, cultural references and intertextuality in tourism reviewers’ (travelers’) identity claims on a travel website (Vasquez, 2014; cf. van Nuenen and Varis in this volume). Vasquez presents the methodological insight that identity research online should not be restricted to online (member/user) profiles but should be extended to, and combined with, close analyses of online interactions – an approach that also characterizes the studies in this volume.

The special issue edited by Leppänen, Møller and Nørreby (2015) has its main focus on *authenticity* and a secondary focus on identity and identification(s). In it, Leppänen, Møller, Nørreby, Stæhr and Kytölä (2015) argue that (dis)authentication processes are “crucial for identification, socio-cultural participation and membership”. The ground covered in that issue includes the usages of semiotic resources online by professional Finnish footballers and the uptake of those usages by diverse audiences (Kytölä & Westinen, 2015), social media discussions on a Danish-born performing artist’s perceived authenticity and legitimacy (Karrebæk, Stæhr, & Varis, 2015), the construction of identities indexical of larger societal categories by young, urban, multi-ethnic Copenhageners on Facebook (Stæhr, 2015), contested categories of belonging and (dis)identifications premised on ethnicity in the rapidly

diversifying Copenhagen (Nørreby & Møller, 2015), and ways in which shared genre, style and discourse conventions in blogging (about dogs) serve as resources for the authentication of gendered human identity across the globe (Leppänen, 2015).

Finally, we briefly review recent contributions to the field published during the time of writing and editing this volume. Such currently emergent topics and approaches include the interplay of virtual gaming environments and their players' identities (Abdullah, 2016), online politeness and *impoliteness* as a means of creating intimacy, distance, and degrees of relationality and friendship (Graham, 2016; cf. chapters by Georgakopoulou and Georgalou in this volume), and the ways in which Facebook users actively and repeatedly co-construct and negotiate their identities in different ways contingent on very particular contextual circumstances (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016, see also this volume)

Simultaneously with the spread of empirical work on identity work in online contexts, important methodological and conceptual advances are underway. Graham (2016, pp. 317–318) calls for further research on the interplay between group and individual identities online, whereas Tagg and Seargeant (2016, pp. 343–344) call for research on the complex interplay, constant re-evaluation and negotiation of default anonymity choices (e.g. 'non-anonymity' on Facebook) with offline identities and debates of authenticity (cf. Leppänen et al., 2015). It is important to remember how the particularities of such identification and authenticity processes may vary radically from platform to platform, from participation format to another. Finally, Page (2016) reviewed debates on online identities so far. In line with the studies reported in the present volume, she, too, argues for the importance of conceptualizing online identity as complex, plural, shifting and unstable, embedded in interactions in physical settings and with their structures of power and hierarchy. She argues that “contexts of interaction where identities are played out are no longer polarized in simplistic, binary contrasts as online or offline, text-based or embodied, playful or authentic”, acknowledging the uses of digital communication as embedded in daily interactions in varying physical locations (Page, 2016, p. 403). In addition, she proposes methodological openness, versatility and diversity, and particularly the combination of big data and close micro-analyses, in future research on digital communication (*ibid.*, pp. 403–404), as well as the need for CMC/digital discourse scholars to fully embrace multimodality as an integral part of their analyses, and to deploy metadata generated by digital platforms – traditionally not always part of linguists' or discourse scholars' analytical and methodological tool kits.

To sum up, in many ways, the key coordinates for future work on CMC and digital discourse discussed by previous scholars are explicitly in focus in this volume: its chapters highlight the complexity, multiplicity and mobility of identifications, the varied connections between online and offline identities, and the importance of methodological innovation in their analysis. Next, we discuss in more detail how the complexity of identity work that previous research has begun to tackle empirically can be usefully framed and understood in light of recent theorizations that explicitly argue for the multidimensionality of identity in late modern societies and settings.

### **Beyond identity in social media**

In order to highlight the active, relational and reflexive processes through which identities are understood, constructed and negotiated in different social contexts, we will next discuss advances from recent critical identity theory. Such a discussion also serves as a means for explicating and positioning the various theoretical stances taken towards identity work in the empirical studies included in this book.

More specifically, we draw on the discussion and problematization of current identity theories by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000)(2). In current discussions and applications of identity theory in social sciences, Brubaker and Cooper (*ibid.*, p. 14) see a need to move beyond the concept of identity as such, and instead conceptualize identity construction as action by social actors. The need for this move arises from their detailed deconstruction of the notion of ‘identity’ as a lay “category of practice” and a scholarly “analytic category” on the basis of which they conclude that, as a concept, identity, mainly perceived as a condition rather than a process (*ibid.*, p. 17), is, on the one hand, too static and reified a notion to be able to do justice to the dynamic and processual nature of identity work, and, on the other, carries “a multivalent, even contradictory theoretical burden”. They thus ask if the social sciences really need such a heavily burdened, deeply ambiguous term (*ibid.*, p. 8). Their answer to this question is, instead of offering a rival conceptualization of ‘identity’, “to unbundle the thick tangle of meanings that have accumulated around the term ‘identity’, and to parcel out the existing identity work to a number of less congested terms.” In this unpackaging, they suggest three clusters of terms each of which highlights particular foci in investigation of the ways in which social actors engage in identity work. These

clusters are (i) *identification*, (ii) *self-understanding and social location*, and (iii) *commonality, connectedness and groupness* (ibid., pp. 17–20).

For Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 14), identification is an intrinsic part of social life, and they argue that “[i]n modern settings, which multiply interactions with others not personally known, such occasions for identification are particularly abundant”, involving a great deal of contextual and situational variation in how “one identifies oneself and how one is identified by others”. Identification, then, refers to acts in which social actors need to characterize themselves and others, to locate themselves with respect to others (and vice versa), to situate themselves and others in a narrative, and to place themselves and others in a category/categories in different contexts.

In principle, identification can be either *relational* or *categorical*, meaning that it can be achieved with respect to different types of relations – such as kinship, friendship, professional or institutional relationships – and in terms of membership of a certain class of persons sharing certain categorical attribute/s (such as race, ethnicity, language, nationality, citizenship, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) (ibid., p. 15). It is also important to note that identification is not only about seeking and indicating alignment and affinity, but it can also entail various acts of *disidentification* whereby social actors can disengage, dis-align or distance themselves from particular identificational stances or possibilities. Accordingly, another basic distinction in Brubaker and Cooper’s framework is between self-identification and the identification of oneself by others, by other social actors, and by powerful, authoritative institutions, such as the state, school, media, or family as well as by socio-cultural discourses, in various degrees and relations of governmentality (ibid., pp. 15–16). A third component of identification, briefly discussed by Brubaker and Cooper (ibid., p. 17), is the psychodynamic meaning associated with identifying oneself emotionally with another person, category, or collectivity, that can involve “complex (and often ambivalent) processes”.

The second cluster of terms that Brubaker and Cooper discuss as a particular aspect of identity work is “situated subjectivity”: “one’s practical cognitive and affective sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act” (ibid., p. 17). This practical sense of the self and its location refers to particular sets of beliefs, norms, rights, obligations and behaviors as conceptualized by people in a social situation. As

a notion situated subjectivity also bears some resemblance to Bourdieu's (1990) influential notion of habitus, i.e. embodied dispositions and tendencies that organize the ways in which individuals perceive the social world around them and react to it. In this connection, too, it is important to bear in mind that, although situated subjectivity highlights particular dispositions of self-perception and action, these do not, however, need to be stable and unchangeable, but can vary and change according to context, as well as involve tensions, uncertainty and ambiguity.

The third key area in Brubaker and Cooper's mapping of identity theory is constituted by the cluster of commonality, connectedness and groupness. These refer to collective identities in terms of common attributes and relational ties between group members, and their sense of belonging to a certain bounded group. In this context, commonality refers to the sharing of some common attribute/s, while connectedness refers to the relational ties that link people. In Brubaker and Cooper's view, "neither commonality nor connectedness alone engenders "groupness" – the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group" (ibid., p. 20). Groupness, in their view, may depend in part on the degrees and forms of commonality and connectedness, but it can also depend on other factors such as "particular events, their encoding in compelling public narratives, prevailing discursive frames, and so on". Relational connectedness is thus not always necessary for "groupness". "A strongly bounded sense of groupness" may also stem from a sense of categorical commonality and of belonging together with little relational connectedness, as, for example, in nationalism (ibid., p. 20).

The multi-dimensional framework suggested by Brubaker and Cooper serves our purposes in this introductory chapter as a useful tool for identifying and highlighting the ways in which the twelve studies constituting this book position themselves theoretically – more or less explicitly – *vis-à-vis* identity work in digital contexts. With the help of the analytic grid provided by this framework, it can be seen that the main orientations towards identity work in these chapters are *categorical identification with the other*, *categorical disidentification from the other*, *categorical self-identification* and *relational identification*. None of the chapters specifically highlight the processes or practices of psychodynamic identification in their analyses of social media activities and interactions, although many of them do point that social media participants' discourse practice includes a great deal of evaluative affectivity, complexity and ambivalence (see e.g. Halonen & Leppänen, Lehtonen, Higgins et al., Kytölä, Zhukova Klausen, Georgakopoulou).

*Categorical identification with and disidentification from the other* is explicitly the focus in several chapters. Such an orientation is at the core of the chapter by Halonen and Leppänen on how a particular intersectional category of young femininity is discursively constructed as a problematic one by storytellers who position themselves as external to this particular category. A similar external and problematizing orientation to a particular group of others – national team footballers from a multicultural family background or a transnational life trajectory – characterizes Kytölä's chapter. In a similar vein, Zhukova Klausen's chapter discusses the categorical disidentification from others – i.e. ways in which what she calls 'psy' discourses are mobilized in social media interaction to categorize transnationality as something that puts transnational individuals at risk. Unlike the other two chapters in this group, Zhukova Klausen also explicitly highlights discursive acts of resistance to problematizing transnational subjectivity as risky, as well as to the proposed identification with such subjectivity. Disidentification from the other (the pro-guilt community) is also in focus in Bortoluzzi's chapter, although, as will be shown below, its primary focus is on the self-identification of the pro-innocent community.

Importantly, at the same time as these chapters discuss discursive processes of categorical disidentifications from the other, they are more or less explicitly also about the identification of the selves in question, about 'us' discursively valorizing 'them'. In this sense, there is also a relational dimension in play in such categorical other-identifications – a dimension that is familiar to us from traditional and stereotypically dichotomous discourses of 'us' versus the 'other' (see e.g. Baumann, 2004). This is revealed by the perspectives, stances and discourses adopted and adapted in the communication: the points of view, voices and ideologies in the data under investigation are those of ingroup members projected onto what are perceived as an outgroup.

Because of this kind of complex identificational agenda, the discourse practices in focus in these chapters also display in different degrees the sense of commonality, connectedness and groupness both of those whose perspectives and voices are presented as those characterizing the identification of others, and of the category targeted in the identifying discourse. For example, Halonen and Leppänen suggest commonality between those discursively established as the ones conducting the disparagement of the young pissing girls. Similarly, Kytölä's analysis emphasizes the commonality, connectedness and even groupness of the 'us'

– neatly captured in his use of the notion of ‘banal nationalism’ – as well as those of the ‘other’ – what is presented as unpatriotic and even traitorous behavior on the part of the allegedly ‘foreign’ footballers in a national team. Also in Zhukova Klausen’s study, commonality, connectedness and groupness take center stage in the investigation: both the ‘other’ identifying the transnationals in focus, and the transnational selves engaged in social media interaction emphasize, albeit in very different ways, transnational individuals as a category who are linked to each other in multiple ways (history, language, ethnicity, life situation, migration) and who share a strong sense of belonging.

Another main orientation to identity work in this book is on *categorical identifications of the self*. Common to the chapters in this category is a primary concern with the perspectives and interests of individuals who locate themselves (once more, more or less explicitly) as members of a particular social category, as mediated and interpreted by the researcher. Owing to their focus on self-identification, they also highlight different degrees of commonality (what the members of the category of subjects in focus (are taken to) share), connectedness (how they are (considered to be) connected to one another) as well as groupness (the extent to which they display a sense of belonging to the same group). One of the clearest cases exemplifying self-identification in this volume is that studied by Lehtonen which focuses on the discursive self-identification of the intersectional category of bronies. Other studies that also primarily highlight categorical self-identifications include that by Bortoluzzi, in which she discusses practices and processes of self-identification by members of a social media community that formed around a joint investment in popular forensics. Other examples in this group include Westinen’s chapter on representations of the ethnic and racialized self as the other, and Higgins, Furukawa and Lee’s chapter on the social media representation and valorization of sociolinguistic diversity in the contexts of Korea and Hawai’i. The latter could be interpreted as dealing with categorical self-identifications insofar as it focuses on local language varieties that characterize particular groups of speakers and their metapragmatic evaluations of these varieties.

Interestingly, once more, in all these chapters the categorical self-identifications they locate are also either explicitly or implicitly contrasted or compared with categorical identifications of the self by others. In the reports by Bortoluzzi, Westinen, and Higgins et al. this shows in their discussions of the ways in which self-identifications are challenged, resisted or subverted by others, whereas the sense of categorical identification of the self by others in

Lehtonen's study is present in the author's discussion of the ways in which the stories in focus also mobilize more general discourses of gender and age.

Self-identification is also a theme in the chapters by Nishimura, Georgalou, and Tagg and Seargeant. In the context of blogging, Nishimura looks at the discursive means for constructing bloggers' age and gender. Self-identification is thus a central concern in the chapter, but, like Bortoluzzi, Westinen and Lehtonen, she also pays attention to how these identifications are interpreted by others. Georgalou is also interested in the discursive ways in which social media users represent themselves as "chronological beings", the category of age thus functioning as the key identificational coordinate directing the author's investigation. Finally, Tagg and Seargeant's chapter looks at how Facebook users account for the ways in which their online identities are shaped by their offline social roles, and how they see the relevance of these roles in the online context. In this sense, what is again of interest are social media users' self-identifications. In addition, as the chapter deals with social media participants' perceptions of their social roles, it also sheds light on the specific ways the respondents' view themselves as social actors and how they locate themselves in the social orders and relations within/outside social media as well as how these disposition them to particular forms of communicative action.

An even clearer focus on social relations, and, consequently, on *relational identification* is displayed in two other chapters: the one by Georgakopoulou, and that by Van Nuenen & Varis. Both are concerned with self-identification and other-identification primarily through the relation between self and other. In Georgakopoulou's study, the relationality of identification – in her words, self-presentation and relations in social media interaction – is the focus of analytic attention, as she sets out to explore processes of participant alignment at the intersection of their interactional practices and the affordances of social media participation. Identification is thus a process that only comes to the fore via the coordinated, relational discursive action of the social media participants themselves. Focusing on a traveler blog, van Nuenen and Varis also deal with identification as a relational process: in their study the focus is, however, less on the analysis of specific interactional moves by the key participants, the blogger and his audiences, but more on how all of them – as a team – via their discursive choices contribute to the construction of the blogger as an expert. Thus, this chapter also shows how identification crucially depends on the functionality and mutuality of the roles and relationship between the social media participants.

To conclude our discussion of the theme of identification in this section, we argue that the notions of identification and situated subjectivity, along with commonality, connectedness and groupness, are particularly useful with respect to the investigation of communication in social media. First, they allow the analyst to conceptualize and investigate social media sites as fora in which identity work is a key concern. A multi-dimensional theorization of identity work such as presented above can help us understand and explain the ways in which, despite geographical distances and/or asynchronicity of communication, social media participants can transparently and meaningfully represent themselves to, and interact with a wide variety of (known and unknown) others. It also allows us to decipher the processes and practices whereby they can take part in the construction and maintenance of collectively monitored communal spaces, ranging from relatively loose, and short-lived affinity spaces to more stable and close-knit communities of practice (for more details, see the discussions in Leppänen et al., 2013, 2014, pp. 113–114; and Gee, 2004).

Second, the conceptualization of identity as something that is actively pursued by social actors underlines the importance of the processes and practices of communication and representation, and, hence, of their investigation with specific reference to the means with which identifications are constructed, negotiated and made sense of. As argued above, we can see how the robust analytic frameworks provided by sociolinguistics, ethnography, discourse studies and the study of multimodality are well suited to this task. In fact, as also our discussion of previous work on identity and CMC and digital discourse already highlighted, the kind of multi-faceted actor- and action-oriented notion of identity work as suggested by Brubaker and Cooper is a key premise in a lot of contemporary studies in these fields. In them, identity is increasingly viewed as socially and situationally constructed, as temporary interactional positions “that social actors briefly occupy and then abandon as they respond to the contingencies of unfolding discourse” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 591; see also De Fina, 2013). With such an analytic apparatus, the social nature of digital communication can be made visible: it can demonstrate in detail how identity work is conducted, made understandable, directed at audiences and their communicative acts, and taken up in the discursive, verbal and other semiotic fine-grain level without losing sight of the fundamental situatedness of communication, and its embeddedness and interaction with particular social structures and relations (see e.g. Bakhtin, 1981; Rampton, 2006, 2007; Blackledge & Creese, 2014, p. 10).

## **Diversities and digital discourse**

The previous section showed how both recent theorizations of the concept of identity and the empirical studies in this book highlight identity as multifaceted and multidimensional social and discursive practice. In this section, we wish to argue how *diversity*, another touchstone in this book, also profits from a similar deconstruction. Why such an explication is felt to be necessary has to do with recent critical discussions and debates (in sociolinguistics in particular) that have problematized and complexified the notion of diversity. As foregrounded in these debates, diversity no longer appears to be a self-evident and transparent social and linguistic phenomenon. The complexity of diversity is also illustrated by the studies included in this book – as will become apparent in our discussion.

### *Social diversity and social media*

One of the stances on diversity in this volume is to see it as a social phenomenon. In this sense, diversity can refer to participants and collectivities as well as their activities and interactions on different kinds of social media sites. Many of the chapters, in fact, focus on sites and activities that, while serving as nexuses for people drawn together on account of their similar interests, concerns or causes, also display a great deal of diversity. Although they are never totally open to anyone and in that sense inclusive, they can and often do include participants from different locations (regions, countries, parts of the world) with different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds whose only or primary contact and channel of communication with each other is provided by social media.

Diversity in the social sense is also approached in some chapters of the book from the perspective of intersectionality. As a theory originally introduced in gender studies (see e.g. Crenshaw, 1989; McCall, 2005, p. 1771; Choo & Marx Ferree, 2010; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013), the study of intersectionality has mainly been concerned with the identification of the ways in which multiple social categories (often, gender, race and class) are co-constituted and interact with each other, often with specific reference to marginalized subjectivities and identities, as well as to social divisions. In such studies in the investigation of diversity, divisions and difference, there has been wide variation in how their focus and range have been understood: these have included at least a focus on a disadvantaged group to give voice to their experiences and perspectives, on the transformations that take place when

different statuses meet (e.g. how race is gendered, or gender is racialized), and on how statuses and relationships continually and mutually constitute each other (Castiello Jones, Misra, & McCurley, 2013). The chapters that explicitly draw on intersectionality in their investigation of social diversity, tend to see it in accordance with the last of these foci, and emphasize how intersections always co-construct identities. In Lehtonen's study, intersectionality provides the author with multiple lenses through which to view brony identities as particular discursive positions at the intersection of gender, age and queerness, whereas in Westinen's study it allows the investigation of the intertwining and simultaneous identity categories of gender, race, class and sexual orientation. Finally, Halonen and Leppänen show how pissiness as a particular type of stylized girlness is discursively performed as an ambivalent intersectional assemblage, bringing together a set of characteristics traditionally seen as antithetical, such as real and fictional, embodied and discursive, authentic and imagined.

#### *Multisemiotic diversity and social media*

Diversity is also approached in this book as a linguistic, discursive and semiotic phenomenon. Overall, the chapters highlight different aspects of the multi-semiotic diversity of social media practices, the ways in which digital communications are conducted in a different languages, varieties and registers and, depending on the affordances of the platforms and applications and on the generic and communal conventions and preferences, display a great deal of stylistic variation and semiotic complexity. In this respect, the social media practices zoomed on in this book testify to the fact that digital media practices nowadays are conducted multilingually, in contrast to the early days of the internet when English was the dominant or most popular language used (see e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2006a). As mentioned above, linguistic diversity has begun to attract a great deal of attention, also more generally, in research on CMC and digital discourse: studies have shown, for example, how in some instances linguistic diversity can involve an overall switch from one language to another, whereas in other contexts, it manifests as a thoroughly enmeshed style, involving features conventionally associated with different languages, varieties or styles, in ways that are situationally and discursively motivated (for overviews, see e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2011; Leppänen & Peuronen, 2012; Lee, 2016).

In addition, social media practices are often characterized by discursive diversity. A case in point is how in the context of informal and interest-driven participatory cultural activities (e.g. speculative fiction, fan fiction and many ludic and transgressive online genres), generic diversity also often serves as one of the key resources for meaning-making (see e.g. Leppänen 2008, 2012). As also noted above, besides studies of linguistic and discursive diversity, in tandem with the development of new technologies that allow users of digital media to draw on other modalities besides the verbal, research has also begun to emphasize how linguistic diversity is increasingly accompanied and intertwined with semiotic diversity and processes of recontextualization and resemiotization of linguistic, discursive and semiotic material in meaning-making (see e.g. Iedema, 2003; Rymes, 2012; Leppänen et al., 2014). With the evolution of Web 2.0, and the consequent diversification of possibilities of digital communication, language-oriented scholarship thus also involves multimodality as a key aspect of research (see Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011b; Jewitt, 2016). From this perspective, diversity in digital social media cannot be seen as an exception but, instead, as one (not yet well understood) example of the multilingual and multisemiotic nature of human communication in general (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014b; Kytölä, 2012, 2014b; Leppänen & Kytölä, in press).

### *Superdiversity and social media*

Recent discussions of diversity in sociolinguistics (see e.g. Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Blommaert, 2015; Arnaut, 2016; Meissner, 2016) have critiqued many of the established notions in sociolinguistics, such as ‘multilingualism’, ‘native speaker’ and ‘language’, as in principle inadequate to theorize and guide empirical research on the kind of complex and shifting diversity - superdiversity - that increasingly characterizes contemporary globalizing societies. In Blommaert’s (2015, p. 83) words, language and superdiversity refer to “a nexus of developments long underway”. According to him, this nexus is best seen as a theoretical and methodological explorative perspective (see also Arnaut, 2016, p. 52) necessitated by “the acceptance of *uncertainty* in sociolinguistic analysis” that compels us to question the traditional assumptions about the sociolinguistic object. In other words, superdiversity as a perspective opens up possibilities for scholarship, on the one hand, to consider “complexity, hybridity, ‘impurity’ and other features of ‘abnormal’ sociolinguistic objects as ‘normal’”; and, on the other hand, to engage in their

ethnographic investigation to find out “how sociolinguistic systems operate rather than to project a priori characteristics onto them” (Blommaert 2015, p. 83).

It has also been argued that the digital contexts themselves can be seen as superdiverse. For example, for Varis and Wang (2016, p. 119), the internet itself constitutes “the superdiverse space par excellence”, a space of varied – albeit regulated, controlled and policed – possibilities for self-expression and community formation, that complexify “the nature of human communication and engagement with others, of transnational movements and migration, and of social and cultural life in general”. In other emergent work on social media language practice and superdiversity (see e.g. Androutsopoulos & Juffermans, 2014a; Leppänen, Møller, & Nørreby, 2015) social media have also been seen to constitute forums for activities and interactions by groups who can themselves be superdiverse, in other words, diverse across a wide range of variables (Vertovec, 2007), highlighting social complexity and the contingency of social patterns with different degrees of permanence (Blommaert, 2015). In these senses, social media spaces can also be argued to resemble superdiverse urban social spaces which Wessendorf (2013), for example, has described as locations in which diversity has become ‘commonplace’. In such spaces, complex diversity and patterns of social relations and interactions across categorical and traditional boundaries are experienced and perceived as a normal part of social life.

In many respects, the relations and interactions in social media by participants with varied and complex identities congregating around shared interests, irrespective of where they come from or what their background is, are a good example of superdiversity. In such social media practices, communication and interaction are often linguistically and discursively heterogeneous, such heterogeneity providing participants with concrete means for identifications that are not organized on the basis of local, ethnic, national, or regional affiliations and allegiances only, but that can be increasingly translocal (Leppänen, 2012; Kytölä, 2016).

While it could be argued that many of the papers in this volume actually address issues that reflect or articulate ideological tensions and valorizations that have to do with globalization and the social and sociolinguistic mobilities this entails, few of them explicitly approach their analyses from a superdiversity perspective. The two clearest exceptions to this are the chapters by Westinen and Kytölä. In Westinen’s contribution, along the lines of

‘superdiversity as a perspective’, the author asserts the importance of not assuming people’s complex and multifaceted (dis)identifications on the basis of the multi-faceted variables that can be used to characterize them, but of the need to empirically explore them. Kytölä’s analysis of football forum discussions and debates highlighting nationalism also frames the resurfacing nationalist discourses with the ethnic, cultural and sociolinguistic diversification of football and football culture.

In addition, it could be argued that most of the studies in this volume in fact identify, address and engage in analysis of what Blommaert (2015) presented as the symptomatic aspects of current sociolinguistic objects – complexity and hybridity. In their analyses, the authors show how participation in social media activities further extends and complicates the communicative – verbal, non-verbal, discursive – resources available to people for communication and interaction. More specifically, many chapters illustrate the complexity, mobility and circulation of people’s repertoires and their linguistic and other semiotic actions that have been claimed to be typical of superdiversity (see e.g. Varis & Wang, 2011; Leppänen & Häkkinen, 2012; Leppänen & Elo, 2016; Leppänen et al., 2013; Arnaut & Spotti, 2015; Leppänen & Kytölä, in press). For example, one indication of this kind of complexity is evident in the ways in which social media participants make use of resources provided by what are conventionally seen as different languages, modes and modalities, along with how they engage in circulation, appropriation, modification and resignification of existing semiotic material (see e.g. Higgins et al.; Georgakopoulou, Nishimura; Lehtonen; Kytölä; Westinen; Halonen & Leppänen). Some papers (e.g. Halonen & Leppänen; Higgins et al.) also illustrate what has been referred to as late modern ‘post-Panopticon’ normativity in action (Arnaut, 2011, 2016; see also Varis & Wang, 2011, 2016; Leppänen et al., 2014), manifesting in the lack of centralized mechanisms of control by ‘those in power’ and in a shift to forms of peer policing of participant activities (see also Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009; Leppänen, 2009). Despite the polycentric and emergent nature of such forms of governmentality and normativity, they effectively hail social media participants and police them into communicative and social conformity.

#### *Diversity and identifications of others and selves*

Most of the chapters engage with diversity via investigations of the differences and divisions in and between groups, as well of the complexity of identifications of the self. What is

interesting in these analyses from the perspective of diversity are the stances they take on diversity and difference, and the ways in which they either explicitly or implicitly construct the self and others. As was already suggested above, in studies that focus on both identifications of the self (such as Lehtonen, Higgins et al., and Nishimura) and (dis)identifications with others (Halonen & Leppänen; Kytölä; Zhukova Klausen; Bortoluzzi), diversity is often seen as a juxtaposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’, ingroup and outgroup, where the outgroup is seen as in some respect significantly (and dubiously) different or deviant from the self-identificational position represented by the authorial stance. Such identifications were also discovered to be characterized by ambiguity or double-voicing, meaning that explicit categorizations of the other/self often involve or at least imply particular categorizations of the other party.

Such implicit or explicit valorizations of selves and others, and/or their features, actions and language uses, may be an indicator of tensions enhanced by the rapidly changing and shifting conditions of globalization that call for re-evaluations of the social, cultural and linguistic realities we live in. In other words, in cases foregrounding such processes of valorization, we may, in fact, trace some indices of superdiversity, despite the fact that the studies in question never frame their observations via the superdiversity lens. In so doing, however, they (more or less implicitly) can be seen to testify to how social media can also engage with superdiversity by offering participants discursive spaces and sets of semiotic resources with which they can strive to make sense of and evaluate their experiences relating to (super)diversity. Accounts, analyses, discussion, debates, critique and disparagement of (super)diversity encountered in physical or mediated environments abound on social media, effectively foregrounding how superdiversity is emerging as a particular nexus for participation and material for further meaning-making spread via the rhizomes provided by the internet (e.g. Leppänen & Häkkinen, 2012; Leppänen & Elo 2016).

In some of the cases investigated in this book, diversity can also be seen as alignment with a number of anticipated or actual others (see e.g. Georgakopoulou; van Nuenen & Varis; Tagg & Seargeant). For example, Georgakopoulou’s study, which focuses on particular discourse activities and the possibility they have for circulation in different sites and to different audiences, investigates ways in which social media participants do alignment with respect to others. The chapter by van Nuenen and Varis, in turn, also highlights how the blogger in focus in their study and his varied audiences co-construct the blogger’s self-presentation via

different ways of indicating alignment and dis-alignment. Finally, Tagg and Seargeant look at how people's offline social roles are made relevant in 'intradiverse' social media contexts as an interactional resource for identity work and relationship building, as well as how their perceptions of their roles may potentially shape or constrain how they manage their online communication.

### **In summary**

As we have shown in detail, this volume foregrounds complex and multiple understandings and stances towards identification and diversity. It approaches identities in social media as social action in which participants, drawing on resources provided by language(s), discourse(s) and other semiotic modes, engage in identity work, discursively indexing their (lack of) commonality, connectedness and groupness with others. The empirical studies included in the book highlight, on the one hand, social media activities centering on identifications and disidentifications with others and identifications of the self, often including either an explicit or implicit positionality vis-à-vis some other purported as relevant in the particular identification in question. On the other hand, the book also demonstrates the effectiveness and sensitivity of sociolinguistic, ethnographic, discourse analytic and semiotic analyses in unravelling the dynamics of identity work in action in social media.

The stance on diversity in the book is also a multi-dimensional one: it encompasses the diversity of participants, their sites, settings, identifications and communicative and discursive resources, as well as emphasizes the potential of superdiversity as a theoretical and methodological perspective in the investigation of complex and shifting sociolinguistic phenomena. Because of the wide-ranging scope of diversity highlighted in this volume, we argue here that diversity is best seen as a plural notion, in other words, as *diversities*. With this notion we wish to emphasize how in social media activities and interactions diversity is played out on multiple levels simultaneously. What also motivates the plural use of the term is our belief that as the technologies, applications and platforms (e.g. mobile small screen technologies), the number and kinds of users (e.g. users from the Global South; users on the move), types of data (increasingly multimodal(3)) as well as the participants' actual uses and capacities to mobilize the technologies for their own purposes increase, we will see even greater diversity (see also Lee (2016, p. 108)(4)). In this respect, this book and its stance on identity work and diversity is only the precursor of work that will need to sharpen its

theoretical eye and analytic tools to keep track of constantly evolving and shifting forms of identifications and diversities in the context of social media practices.

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### **A note on ethical issues in research on digital discourse**

Research on the rapidly changing contexts of digital discourse and online communities has evoked debate on ethical considerations (AoIR, 2012; Leppänen et al., 2015; Stæhr, 2014, pp. 25–34; Kytölä, 2012, 2013). In all of the chapters in this volume, the researchers have followed their own, well-informed principles of ethically sound research, and each chapter discusses the ethical issues that have been most central in the research reported. Broadly speaking, the sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic study of social media and online communities should be attuned to the following ethical issues (adopted from Leppänen et al., 2015):

- 1) Data collection and selection. The researcher needs to make sure that their access to and observation of online discourse events or online data, and their relation to possible relevant offline events or data, are legitimate. The researcher should clarify and give an idea of their self-positioning towards the online communities in focus.
- 2) The researcher's informed sensitivity to controversial issues. This means that the selected data are ethically sound and appropriate data, and that data that are inappropriately sensitive or personal are excluded from closer scrutiny.
- 3) Anonymity and/or credit to online social actors. The researcher needs to guarantee sufficient anonymity to the authors of online discourse and informants from online communities who are being researched. In addition, or alternatively, research needs to adequately credit authors who may have a desire to be acknowledged for their online (creative) 'work'.

Due to the lack of straightforward, 'one-size-fits-all' solutions or guidelines, these three aspects of research ethics should receive careful consideration and generate well-informed choices on the part of the researcher. Key ethical considerations for researchers include the importance of not damaging any persons or their reputations, not circulating sensitive

personal information revealed during research, and obtaining their informed consent from key informants when relevant and possible (see Leppänen et al., 2015, for more; see also AoIR, 2012).

## Endnotes

1.

Some indication of the number of social media users is provided by the available statistics. For example, according to e-Marketer (see <http://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>), in 2016, 2.34 billion people in the world use social network platforms. This is about 31% of the total world population (7.4 billion in 2016, see e.g. [http://www.geohive.com/earth/population\\_now.aspx](http://www.geohive.com/earth/population_now.aspx)). By 2020, it is predicted that the number of social network users will be 2.95 billion.

2.

While the notion of identification has been referred to by some sociolinguists and discourse scholars (see e.g. Bucholtz & Hall, 2003; Jenkins, 2008; Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2008), unlike Brubaker and Cooper, they have not suggested as detailed a theoretical deconstruction of the concept of identity as a basis for an explicit and multi-faceted reconceptualization of identity work. Nevertheless, empirically, their work is geared towards the investigation of identity work as something actively and dynamically conducted by social actors.

3.

In fact, one of the most prevalent social network sites, Facebook announced at the time of finalizing this book (June 2016) that in the future, textual updates by users on Facebook might be completely replaced by videos (see e.g. <http://fortune.com/2016/06/14/facebook-video-live/?iid=leftail>).

4.

According to our searches, the plural form of the term is rarely used by scholars. A few uses of ‘diversities’, were, however, discovered. For example, the term is used as a label in emergent research initiatives (e.g. Southern multilingualisms and diversities consortium, <https://southernmultilingualisms.org/news/>). Also in urban studies, scholars such as Bonnes, Bonaiuto, Nenci and Carrus (2011, p. 3–4) use the notion, stating that “various diversities [...] characterize urban settings across different geographical and cultural contexts” and exploring how these different diversities, biological, technological, historical, cultural, ethnic, architectural, and social-psychological, are in interplay in cities. Similar plural form is also highlighted in the name of the journal *New Diversities*, where it is used to refer “to different kinds of social difference, including ethnicity, religion, language, gender, sexuality, disability, social status and age, and to ways in which these notions are socially constructed, how they unfold in different contexts and how they are addressed in policy and practice.” (<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/resources/periodicals/diversities/>, n.d.).

1.

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