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Beyond anonymity, or future directions for internet identity research

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Abstract
This article draws on empirical research into internet use by minority ethnic women to consider whether anonymity remains a useful focus for sociocultural studies of internet identities. The central argument of the article is that the time has come for internet identity research to reposition itself conceptually, to move away from a preoccupation with the generalized, enduring claim that internet identities are anonymous, multiple and fragmented – not only because, in some cases, online identities are continuous with offline selves, but also, more importantly, because common uses of the concept of anonymity are limited as starting points for carrying out analyses of internet experiences. In short, it argues that the terms of internet identity research are problematic, that contexts matter, and that studies of internet identities need to engage with and learn from ongoing debates within cultural studies which call into question the usefulness of the very concept of identity.

Key words
anonymity • cultural studies and identity • gender • homepages • internet identity research • race • world wide web
INTRODUCTION: THE INTERNET, IDENTITY AND ANONYMITY

In his overview of the short history of the field that he defines as cyberculture studies (which has many overlaps with new media studies), Silver (2000) suggests that the area has moved through three key phases. The first phase he defines as ‘popular cyberculture’, consisting of descriptive journalism, often in the columns of magazines. The second phase builds on this and is defined as ‘cyberculture studies’: while more academic and less journalistic, it was marked by equally celebratory literature such as Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* (1993) and Turkle’s *Life on the Screen* (1996). These texts also reflect the focus on virtual communities and online identities that marked this historical phase. Writing in 2000, Silver claims that we are now in a phase of ‘critical cybercultural studies’, characterized by a concern with contextualizing cyber-experiences and the emergence of a broader range of empirical studies of cyberworlds. Consequently, cyberculture studies are now more theoretically nuanced and more empirically based than they were in the past.

Although the neat chronology of events implied in Silver’s account is somewhat oversimplified, he makes a number of important claims — that, today, cyberculture studies is increasingly populated by empirical research and focused on a broader range of concerns than identity and community, resulting in more diverse and richer theorizations than existed 15 years ago. Nevertheless, a number of writers continue to argue that there has been too much focus on identity in cultural studies of the internet. For example, Hine (2001) proposes that conceiving of webpages as performances of identity fails to acknowledge the social and cultural meaning of webpage production, and McPherson (2000) argues that instead of focusing on identity play online, we should consider politics and participation in order to understand cyberworlds. Furthermore, within some sectors of cultural studies, for some time there has been debate about the usefulness of the very concept of identity — from Hall’s essay ‘Who Needs Identity?’ (1996), which criticizes the essentialist model of human subjectivity embodied in this concept, to more recent literature influenced by the work of Deleuze, which proposes alternatives to identity as more effective starting points for carrying out sociocultural research (for example, Parisi and Terranova, 2001).

Despite these critical interventions, the tropes of identity and community endure, and it is within this context of debates about whether identity remains a useful focus for studies of the internet and other new media that this article is located. The aim of the article is to map the field of internet identity research, point to some of its limitations and suggest some future directions. The article problematizes the specific claim in internet identity research that virtual identities are anonymous (Turkle, 1996); some of them might be, but there are problems with this generalized, enduring claim. I
argue that online identities are often continuous with offline selves, not reconfigured versions of subjectivities in real life; for this reason it is necessary to go beyond internet identities, to look at offline contexts of online selves, in order to comprehend virtual life fully. More importantly, the concept of anonymity is problematic because it fixes the relationship between being and feeling in a way that limits the exploration of the significant differences between these two conditions – concepts other than anonymity, therefore, might be more helpful in conceptualizing internet identities. If internet identity research is to reposition itself conceptually, as is proposed here, then it needs to engage with and learn from ongoing debates within cultural studies which call into question the usefulness of the concept of identity. To date, such an engagement has been surprisingly absent from considerations of identity within new media studies, despite the close relationship between these two fields. This engagement may lead internet identity researchers to start with a different set of conceptual tools than those mobilized to date which, in turn, might lead to some new conceptual developments within the broader field of new media studies, within which internet identity research is located.

This article draws on empirical research into internet use by a group of minority ethnic women in the UK on Project Her®, which took place in the late 1990s. Project Her® was an experiment in computer-mediated distance learning which aimed to enhance access to university education for women from disadvantaged backgrounds. Fourteen mature, minority ethnic, working-class women took part in the project, whose purpose was to respond to a range of inequalities in a region of the UK which is characterized by economic disadvantage, limited engagement in university education and subsequent high unemployment. The extent of the digital divide at the time meant that many inhabitants of the region were unlikely to have access to digital networks. It is within this social and economic context that Project Her® was developed.

Project Her® developed a foundation course, delivered partly by computer-mediated distance learning, which offered women who had been out of education for some time the opportunity to improve study and communication skills, and which guaranteed its students places on degree courses upon successful completion. Both the foundation course and the degree courses to which successful students could progress aimed to develop students’ technical skills in media, multimedia or information technology, as well as their critical understanding of the range of complex relationships between technologies and societies. It was felt that distance and e-learning approaches might attract a group of women otherwise unable to commit to full-time study, by providing a flexible learning environment in which communication could take place asynchronously. The project funded the purchase of personal computers, which were loaned to students and installed...
in their own homes for the duration of the course. It subsidized students’ online time for several hours a week, and their phone calls to their tutors, each other and the project’s technical support team.

A condition of acceptance onto Project Her® was that students consented to our use of their distance-learning assessed work as research data and to participating in interviews with us – indeed, the students chose their own pseudonyms for research purposes. The assessed work included written reflections about students’ techno-experiences and individual homepages, the latter of which are the central focus of this article. Individual interviews were carried out in students’ own homes about halfway through the course. Later, when the majority of the students had entered the first year of their degree programmes, a second round of interviews was completed, this time in small groups on the university campus. Just under three years later, I attempted to contact those students who had produced individual homepages while on the Her® course, asking them if they would be willing to answer some more research questions. Given the passage of time, it was not surprising that only four responses to the request were received. As one of the arguments here is that it is necessary to look at the offline contexts in which internet identities are produced, it is inevitable that this article draws on the students’ written narratives and on interview material as well as their homepages. It discusses this empirical material and its implications for internet identity research after an overview of the literature within the field.

IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET: MAPPING THE FIELD

A history of internet identity research has no better starting point than Turkle’s Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, first published in the USA in 1995 and the UK in 1996. In Life on the Screen (Turkle, 1996), a classic study of the relationship between identity construction and networked technologies, Turkle argued that online, identity changes, becoming fluid and fragmented. Most of what Turkle claimed about the relationship between the internet and fragmented identity was based on the experiences of her research subjects, largely college students, in multi-user domains (MUDs). The comment of one MUD participant, who said that ‘part of me, a very important part of me, only exists inside PernMUD’5 (Turkle, 1996: 12), was symptomatic of her respondents’ experiences, which suggested that in such anonymous environments, identity can be broken into fragments, deconstructed and reconstructed. Turkle also argued that homepages reflect fragmented identities, as ‘home pages on the web are one recent and dramatic illustration of new notions of identity as multiple yet coherent’ (Turkle, 1996: 259). In these words Turkle indicated that, despite her attraction to the postmodern notion of decentred identity and the
experiences of fragmentation that her research subjects reported, ultimately
she had difficulty with these concepts. Other writers have demonstrated a
greater commitment to the notion of digitally-fragmented identity, such as
Plant (1997) and Haraway (1998). Haraway has argued that it is politically
important to split identity because acknowledging identity as always partial,
never complete, allows the subject to join with and understand other partial
beings, therefore facilitating political alliances and coalitions across
difference: ‘the split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate
positionings and be accountable; the one who can construct and join
rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history’ (Haraway,

In contrast, Turkle demonstrated a commitment to the centred and
unified self when she concluded her study with the following words:

Virtual environments are valuable as places where we can acknowledge our
inner diversity. But we still want an authentic experience of self. One’s fear is,
of course, that in the culture of simulation, a word like authenticity can no
longer apply. (Turkle, 1996: 254)

Despite this conclusion, Turkle’s work is not known for its ultimate
loyalty to authentic, coherent identity, but rather for its celebration of
fragmented and multiple identity experimentation. Indeed, for some time,
this latter reading of Turkle informed much writing on digital, virtual
identity (for example, Cheung, 2000; Poster, 1999; Shields, 1996). More
recently, however, as detailed empirical, ethnographic and biographical
studies have been carried out, different conceptualizations of internet
identity have begun to populate the theoretical landscape. For example, as a
result of her ethnographic study of the online forum BlueSky, Kendall
concludes that, despite prevailing claims about multiple and fluid identities
in such environments, BlueSky participants ‘continually work to
reincorporate their experiences of themselves and of others’ selves into
integrated, consistent wholes’ (Kendall, 1999: 62). In other words, in some
cases, virtual identity is not fragmented but stable; in some forums, relatively
unified cyber-identities are presented.

Furthermore, it is now evident that it is necessary to differentiate between
the types of identity presented in distinct internet environments. Tetzlaff
(2000), for example, makes a distinction between digital identities in
homepages and other more text-based forums, arguing that while in the
latter, identity may be fluid, in the former it is more fixed because of the
types of ‘data’ located there – photographs, contact details and so on (see
also Miller and Mather, 1998). Clearly, new digital forms may result in new
digital identities and, as Wakeford argues, it is necessary to specify which
aspects of new media are under examination in order to avoid the kind of
‘conceptual leakage’ (Wakeford, 1997: 54) that occurs when ideas about
identity in one virtual context are applied to others. At the same time, the empirical research reported in this article suggests that it is not helpful to polarize virtual identity types as Tetzlaff does (as is argued later).

Perhaps the most enduring concern about internet identity to emerge from Turkle’s work addresses the relationship between virtuality and anonymity. Turkle argued that in anonymous MOOs and MUDs, people can disguise aspects of identity which might lead to discrimination, such as race or gender, and so can perform a range of identity positions, hiding marginal identities and becoming part of the mainstream. Implicit in Turkle’s claim is the assumption that anonymity in cyberspace is potentially empowering: because we cannot see each other, we cannot judge each other; consequently, virtual worlds are equalizing. What is more, anonymous online settings are empowering because they facilitate identity exploration, or occupying identity positions which may be difficult to occupy in real life (see Shaw, 1997, for an example of this argument). Not surprisingly, however, a number of scholars have pointed out that online anonymity is more problematic than this. For example, discussing the increased incivility in the electronic exchanges he witnessed in the site of his research, Santa Monica’s Public Electronic Network, Schmitz (1997) has disputed the claim that such environments are necessarily democratic because of the absence of visual clues to identity. Instead, he argued that although some ‘markers of difference’ are difficult to detect in online communication, others are easy to identify, so that judgement and discrimination still exist. He wrote that:

Although physical appearance, dress, and other status cues recede, educational competencies and linguistic skills increase in importance. Computer-communication media are not neutral with regard to culture, education, and socio-economic class. And electronic persons are not more ‘equal’ than proximate individuals, we just use different criteria to rate them. (Schmitz, 1997: 85)

Further, other more recent studies have indicated that not all online communities are created for anonymous identity performance and not all participants engage in virtual environments anonymously. As a result of their research, Roberts and Parks (2001) have concluded that the performance of alternative genders is practised by a small minority and viewed by many as dishonest. Similarly, Kendall (1999) has argued that anonymity is not a factor in the MUD she studied and that many MUDders would object to the trivializing of all MUDs as forums for playing identity games. Baym summed up the issues at stake in 1998 when she wrote that:

Judging from the scholarly attention paid to anonymous CMC interaction and its uses in identity play, one would think most on-line interaction is anonymous and few people ever interact as themselves. The reality seems to be that many, probably most, social users of CMC create on-line selves consistent with their off-line identities. (1998: 55)
Of course, the fluidity and fragmentation that Turkle claims for internet identities can be found also in a broader range of literature concerned with postmodern identity more generally – digital, virtual environments are commonly seen as arenas in which fragmented, fluid postmodern identities can be realised. Therefore, debates about internet identities within new media studies need to be located in the context of wider debates about identity. Despite the origins of much new media studies in the more established discipline of cultural studies, fewer discussions of internet identities locate themselves within the rich debate about identity than can be found within cultural studies (Bell’s chapter ‘Identities in Cyberculture’ in An Introduction to Cybercultures [2001] is one exception to this). This absence is problematic, because it means that studies of internet identities in particular, and new media studies more generally, fail to engage with debates that might help to develop new media theory. What is needed is an identification of, and engagement with, important debates about identity that can inform future new media studies.

For example, in his seminal essay ‘Who Needs Identity?’, Hall (1996) traces a move in cultural studies towards an understanding of identity as decentred and multiple, along similar lines to those outlined by Turkle. Despite increasing acknowledgement of identity as hybrid, Hall claims that the term ‘identity’ itself is too bound up with essentialist approaches to human subjectivity, which leads him to reject this concept in favour of his preferred notion of identification. He favours identification because:

> it accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. (Hall, 1996: 4)

For Hall, identification means ‘points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us’ (1996: 19); it is less fixed than identity, more fluid and contingent. Like Hall, Braidotti (1994) seeks a more useful term than ‘identity’ with which to theorize contemporary subjectivity; she settles upon the concept of ‘nomadic subjects’. For Braidotti, this term also captures the positionality that characterizes postmodern identity; the nomad is thoroughly postmodern because s/he ‘ha[s] relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity’ (Braidotti, 1994: 22). Identity is a matter of constant becomings, which Braidotti refers to as the practice of ‘as-if’, ‘the affirmation of fluid boundaries, a practice of the intervals, of the interfaces, and the interstices’ (1994: 7).

Braidotti takes her concept of becoming from Deleuze (1973), who has influenced a number of contemporary cultural theorists to reject the
concept of identity and start the project of cultural theorization with a different set of conceptual tools. As with Hall, the problem with identity for Deleuze is that it implies stability and stasis, whereas what really offers creative and theoretical potential is difference – not being (as implied in the term ‘identity’), but becoming. Building on the work of Deleuze and others, a number of alternatives to identity are proposed – for example, some writers have argued that the concept of affect is a useful starting point for cultural theory (such as Parisi and Terranova, 2001). Affects in cultural objects result in affections, or emotional and bodily reactions, in experiencing subjects, but affects themselves are free from ‘the particular observers or bodies who experience them’ (Colebrook, 2002: 22), so that the concept of affect moves beyond identity or the experiencing subject. The concept of affect also shifts the focus of analysis away from what cultural objects mean, which has been the central concern in cultural studies to date, by encouraging consideration of what such objects are and do, how they feel and their bodily impacts, intensities and intimacies.

When I first analysed the homepages of Project Her@ students (Kennedy, 1999), I wanted to explore the extent to which some of the generalized claims that took hold as a result of Turkle’s study could be applied to the homepage form, particularly those regarding online anonymity. The conclusions drawn as a result of the analysis changed over time, as I moved from a focus on the homepage text to consider the contexts of their production and the meanings of the texts for their producers. This process led me to rethink my original conclusions about the apparent absence of anonymity in the homepages. It led me to identify the limitations not only of focusing on the homepage texts, but also of common uses of the concept of anonymity in internet identity research, which assume a fixed, continuous relationship between being and feeling. In contrast, my empirical material pointed to a distinction between being and feeling, between being anonymous and feeling anonymous in the internet identities of the research subjects. Recognizing the limits of anonymity for making sense of internet identities and the subsequent need to seek a different set of conceptual tools, I suggest that there is much to be learned from the cultural studies debates about identity outlined previously, in which the problems associated with markedly fixed concepts are also addressed and alternative theoretical tools are also sought. The next section discusses this analytical process in detail.

ANONYMITY IN HER@ STUDENTS’ HOMEPAGES
The Her@ students’ personal homepages were produced at the end of their year-long studies after they had carried out a range of preparatory activities, including thinking about the uses, advantages, disadvantages and potential risks of having a homepage, and participating in the production of a
collective, group homepage in order to learn about the process of webpage creation. The students did not receive any guidance about the specific content that they should include in their homepages. Instead, the criteria for assessing their efforts focused on the extent to which they had considered technical and design issues such as quantity of text, size of images, download time, balance and use of hyperlinks. Clearly, the Her@ students’ familiarity with the homepage genre, the themes of the course that they were undertaking and the fact that they were submitting their homepages for assessment will have influenced, to some extent, their production of this ‘research data’. Reflecting on the research data that interviews generate, Day Sclater has written that ‘the interview is an intersubjective process, and the narrative account is jointly produced’ (1998: 90); a claim which, arguably, applies to all research data. The general educational context and specific assessment conditions set by the Her@ research team contributed to the joint production of the students’ homepages, but other research data is also produced in conditions controlled by the researcher, like interviews. Therefore, the Her@ students’ homepages can be read as expressions of their identity in conditions which were not of their making.

In the initial analysis of the Her@ students’ homepages (Kennedy, 1999), the claim was questioned that online, people hide aspects of their identity which might otherwise lead to discrimination (such as ‘race’ or gender), and that this is empowering for a number of reasons. First, homepages generate different types of online identities and experiences than textual forums such as MUDs and Turkle’s (1996) findings in relation to these text-based spaces did not apply to the more visual and multimedia form of the world wide web homepages of the Her@ students. More importantly, it was found that the students showed no sign of wanting to hide their gender and ethnicity and so ‘benefit’ from the possibility of anonymity that cyberspace offered them. Rather, they made explicit and implicit references to their gender and ethnicity in their homepages. Many of the Her@ students made their ethnicity central to their homepages, just as it is central to their identity, through the inclusion of images such as: an image of an African mother and child on Askari’s site, a painting of a group of black graduates on Teti’s, Sasha’s link to Flavortown, a black entertainment site, and Tessa’s inclusion of a flag of Trinidad.

In addition to images, another way in which identity is constructed in homepages is through links – as Miller (1995) claims, ‘Show me what your links are, and I’ll tell you what kind of person you are’. In this case, the sites to which Her@ students linked are also statements of their ethnicity. Lorraine linked to a black cultural bookshop, Sasha to BlackNetUK, Roni to a site about beauty products for black women, with the words ‘Black women need cosmetics that are specific to our skin types’ (emphasis added). In one version of her site, Teti included a link to ‘World of Black Studies’
and Noori linked to a site by and about Asian women. Once students were familiar with surfing the web it became clear that, as Askari put it, ‘being part of the Black Internet community’ was important to many students. Furthermore, their identities and experiences as minority ethnic women led them to make their gender, like their ethnicity, central to their homepages, particularly through references to their roles as mothers. Askari’s image of an African mother and child could be read as a representation of her own motherhood; Teti and Lorraine stated that the most important role in their lives was being a mother; Sha and Tessa mentioned that they were mothers; Roni chose to share her site with her daughter; Lorraine’s links to educational sites could be read as evidence of her motherly concerns; and Noori and Chimwe wrote about their difficulties combining their responsibilities as mothers with their studies. Noori’s homepage reflected on the difficulties she experienced in fulfilling the conventional expectations of a Muslim wife and mother. At one point she wrote that:

> During Ramadan I used to wake up to cook at 3 or 4 a.m. and not go back to sleep again because I would not be able to wake up to take the children to school or go to class. I used the time wisely, though I managed to get the revision done for the exam, sometimes I would almost miss the Fajár [dawn prayer] because I was on the computer.

Like links, guestbooks could be conceived as spaces in which the identity of the self is constructed through identifications with and recognition from others. The people who signed Sasha’s guestbook constitute the community of which she was a part and the language that they used, like Sasha’s, identified them as young and black. For example, ‘Mr Lover’ made the following entry in Sasha’s guestbook:

> Say Wha happen Miss Sasha how come mi never did see you from time and you kyant call Mr Lover But still mi have nuff love fi you, Anyway mi come fi say BIG up your Sexy and Fine self and mi go talk to you soon coz mi have someting fi say to you (I bet you worried now don’t be) seen.

> one love Girl!!

The one and only MR LOVER XXXX

While Mr Lover’s message needs to be paraphrased in a footnote so that it can be understood by the geographically dispersed and ethnically diverse readership of this journal, it would be more easily recognized and understood by young African-Caribbeans in the UK as locating both Mr Lover and Sasha as part of a young, black, internet community. Indeed, throughout her site, Sasha’s identity as a young woman was communicated through the language she used – she made extensive use of exclamation
marks, abbreviations (like ‘coz’, ‘ya’ and ‘yall’) and slang (such as the phrase ‘Big Up’, or praise). The type of music she liked, ragga and rap, underlined her young age as well as her ethnicity; this is also the case for Roni, who wrote extensively about the music (and physical appearance) of black ‘gangsta’ rappers.

Consideration of the students’ comments in their written reflections about their homepages suggests that, while their internet identities could not be defined as anonymous, neither are they ‘fixed’, as Tetzlaff (2000) and Miller and Mather (1998) have argued. Consequently, these polarized understandings of internet identities – fragmented and anonymous or fixed and archived – are not helpful. After all, a webpage is a media form which is never entirely finished, just as identity composition is a continuous process – both are constantly ‘under construction’. Sasha’s homepage, which has changed several times since she first built it, suggests that she wanted the representation of herself on the web to change, not to be fixed. The numerous versions of her website that Teti produced indicate that she constructed slightly altered representations of her identity in each new version, none of which was more or less her. The final version was chosen not because it was a ‘better’ or ‘truer’ representation of herself, but rather because time was up and the latest version had to do. As Askari wrote of her website, ‘I felt it was difficult to incorporate the “right” image of myself, an image I wanted the rest of the world to see and like.’ Her use of quotation marks around the word ‘right’ problematizes this concept, and her words suggest that she struggled to capture an ‘accurate’ representation of herself and toyed with more than one construction of herself as she developed her website. She is one Her@ student who happily left her site explicitly ‘under construction’.

Nevertheless, despite the initial conclusion that Her@ students showed no signs of anonymous identity experimentation in their homepages, the intimate, confessional style of some of their homepage content suggested that, in fact, they appeared to feel anonymous online. A number of students demonstrated a tendency to be ‘extraordinarily frank and revealing’, to use Chandler’s description of the authors of the homepages he studied (Chandler, 1998). One student, Noori, wrote at length about the lack of support offered to her by her husband, who insisted that she continued her domestic duties while studying full-time, even though he was out of work at the time. In her first draft of her homepage, she was very critical of her husband, writing:

It hasn’t been easy with a husband who won’t lift a finger or offer any kind of support. Sometimes I am in the middle of typing an assignment and he will ask for a cup of tea, if I don’t get it for him right away he will start complaining.
After some discussion with her tutors about homepages as public
documents, she decided to remove these comments from her final draft.
Although some students demonstrated caution over the inclusion of personal
information on their homepages (one student, Sasha, included photographs
of herself; only one other, Roni, included her email address) and some, like
Oyen and Lorraine, reflected on the need to be careful about the inclusion
of personal data in homepages, there is a lot of personal detail on the Her@
students’ homepages: for example, all of them include their first names and
the majority of them include their surnames.
As a result of these apparently contradictory tendencies, on the one hand
confessional and intimate (in other words, feeling anonymous) and, on the
other, including detailed personal data (in other words, not being
anonymous), three years after the homepages had been produced, some of
the former Her@ students were interviewed about the issue of anonymity in
internet identities. They were asked whether anonymity had been an issue
for them – for example, had they wanted to preserve their anonymity, or
remove it by stating openly who they were? Their responses problematized
the earlier reading of the homepages (which had depended heavily on a
textual analysis of the students’ online selves), in which it was felt that their
references to their gender and race, as well as their inclusion of names and
surnames, meant that their virtual identities were not anonymous. As these
interviews revealed, the concept of anonymity is more complex than this.
For example, one student, Tessa, questioned the reading of her inclusion
on her homepage of an image of a Trinidadian flag and her reference to
Caribbean foods such as plantain and avocado as an indication of her black
identity. She suggested that this aspect of her identity was less visible than
the researcher thought; she pointed out that there are white Trinidadians
and that white people like Caribbean food, so her ethnicity was more
hidden than the reading suggested. Noori, the student who wrote critically
about her husband, said that she still felt a degree of anonymity in her
homepage, despite including her name and surname – she might identify
herself as Noori Begum, but which Noori Begum? These interview
responses suggested that, for some homepage producers, there is a
distinction between being anonymous and feeling anonymous, which arguably
derives from the dual role of the world wide web as both public (publishing
thoughts, feelings and identities to a potentially large audience) and private
(located in the home, a medium used to construct thoughts, feelings and
identities) (Chandler, 1998). Some Her@ students may have given their
names and surnames, but they still appeared to feel a degree of anonymity
in their homepages. Anonymity, therefore, was not as absent from the Her@
students’ homepages as was first thought.
These findings indicate the need for internet identity research to move
beyond a simple acceptance of the claim that whereas people experiment
with anonymous identities in virtual contexts such as MUDs, the inclusion of photographs and other autobiographical detail in homepages reveals the ‘true’ identities of their authors and so erases the possibility of anonymity (Tetzlaff, 2000). Such understandings need to take account of the importance of going beyond online lives and selves to consider the offline context of their production and consumption. This means not just acknowledging who the producers of online selves are offline, but also considering how they feel about their online selves. To use Hine’s phrase, it is necessary to think about the ways in which online selves are socially meaningful to their offline counterparts: ‘In order to understand the form of WWW pages it is crucial to understand their significance for their authors’ (Hine, 2001: 183). Studying online texts in offline contexts makes this possible, argues Hine, and such an approach enhances understanding of the context of production of the online text, as well as the text itself. That many of the Her@ students identify as black women in their homepages and, arguably, empower themselves and other black women in this process, indicates the importance of who the Her@ students are offline in shaping who they are online, demonstrating that online lives are lived and produced in the context of life offline – as Kendall points out: ‘Nobody lives only in cyberspace’ (1999: 70).

The shift in the reading of the homepages, from an initial conclusion that the Her@ students did not engage in the presentation of anonymous identities, to an acknowledgement that there were traces of anonymity in their online representations of selves, indicates that there are degrees of anonymity in internet identities which are varied and situated, and so problematizes the very concept of anonymity. This suggests that more complex categories than ‘anonymity’ are needed to conceptualize internet identities and comprehend them more fully. Åkesson (2001) discovered comparable complexity in his study of the Swedish gay men’s portal Sylvester (www.Sylvester.se), in which one of his respondents included photographs of himself and other personal details on his homepage on the portal but did not want Åkesson to use his (the respondent’s) real name in his final study. Consequently, the author suggests that ‘half-anonymity’ is a more useful concept than ‘anonymity’ for analysing his data.

In contrast to refining the concept of anonymity, I suggest that it may be more productive to turn to some new conceptual tools. The problem with the concept of anonymity is that it is too fixed and stable to allow for recognition of the differences between being anonymous and feeling anonymous – internet identities either are, or are not, anonymous. Consequently, the being/feeling relationship is fixed: being and feeling are locked together in a way that limits exploration of the significant differences between them and what these differences might reveal about the simultaneously public and private character of the internet. It is here that
internet identity research could learn fruitfully from cultural studies debates about identities. The parallels between the problem with identity, which has been identified in cultural studies, and the problem with anonymity, which has been identified here – that both are too fixed to recognize the fragmentation, temporality and contingency of the experiencing subject – suggest that, like cultural studies, internet identity research could benefit from considering whether there are other conceptual tools which could be effectively mobilized more, which acknowledge, for example, the distinction between being and feeling in internet identities, concepts like identification, affect, ‘as-if’ and becoming. The argument here is not that internet identity researchers should abandon all existing conceptual tools, but rather that a more rudimentary step needs to be taken – to engage with such cultural studies debates about identity. This is the next conceptual step for internet identity research in particular, and new media studies in general.

CONCLUSION: FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR INTERNET IDENTITY RESEARCH
Identity has been a significant theme in studies of the overlapping terrains of the internet, cyberculture and new media, because of the opportunities for identity experimentation that virtual networked environments initially seemed to open up, and because of the centrality of identity in political life. Early celebrations of the possibilities of online identity play have been grounded more recently by empirical research, which has proposed a more complex range of relationships between online and offline identity. This research has problematized some of the key terms of internet identity research and pointed to the need to understand virtuality in relation to and as part of reality. The empirical research from Project Her® discussed in this article also does these two things. It has demonstrated how moving beyond the Project Her® student homepages to discuss their meanings for their producers with the producers themselves led to a richer reading of the online texts. One of the conclusions drawn as a result of this process is that the concept of anonymity is more complex than it seems at first glance – there is a distinction between feeling and being anonymous, and there are degrees of anonymity which are varied and situated. Like others, I too have found the terms of internet identity research limited and problematic.

While some academics have identified that terms such as ‘anonymity’ are too simplistic for understanding internet identities (for example, Åkesson, 2001; Baym, 1998) and others have stressed the importance of looking at contexts (for example, Hine, 2001; Kendall, 1999), very few internet identity researchers have engaged with contemporary cultural studies debates about identity. Even fewer have brought all three together, and I propose that this is what is needed now – for future research to move beyond anonymity, look at contexts and engage with and learn from the theoretical
work that is taking place within cultural studies. In particular, researchers of virtual identities need to consider whether the concepts which are taking ground in cultural studies, such as affect, identification, nomadic practice, ‘as-if’ and becoming, might open up new insights and allow for new conceptual developments within internet identity research in particular, and new media research in general. For empirical researchers, this means two things. The first is to reflect on how research is conceived and whether identity remains a useful and illuminating starting point for new media research. The second is to reflect on the way that empirical material is analysed and consider whether the alternative notions identified here provide new methodological and analytical tools, as well as conceptual ones.

The argument of this article raises the question of whether identity still matters, in theory, in internet and new media research, and in practice, ‘as a contested fact of contemporary political life’ (Gilroy, 1997: 301). It has been argued here that, theoretically, it is time for internet identity research to reposition itself conceptually and that reflection is needed on the appropriateness of the concepts mobilized in this field for future research, concepts such as anonymity or, indeed, if we are to follow cultural studies’ lead, identity itself. However, while academics may have a duty to contemplate whether identity retains validity conceptually and theoretically, those involved in identity politics on the ground – those experiencing hostility because of their ‘different’ identities, for example – may not feel that they share this duty (or indeed luxury). Therefore, what is important is to take these conceptual steps without losing sight of identity as embodied experience, of the real struggles of real people whose identities are fiercely contested or defended – in other words, without losing sight of identity-as-practice. This is the real challenge for internet identity research.

Notes

1 Although there is no simple definition of identity which is suitable for my purposes, some brief introductory comments are useful in framing the discussion that follows. Even a somewhat clichéd source such as a dictionary gives useful pointers to some of the characteristics of identity. The Collins English Dictionary, for example, defines identity simultaneously as ‘the state of having unique identifying characteristics held by no other person or thing’, ‘the individual characteristics by which a person or thing is identifiable’ and ‘the state of being the same in nature, quality, etc.’ (Collins, 1979: 728). In these definitions, identity is characterized both by uniqueness and sameness. Woodward (2000) argues that the construction of identity, the process of actively taking up identity positions and presenting the resulting constructions to others, is what distinguishes identity from other, similar terms such as subjectivity. The concept of subjectivity also embodies some of the tensions, contradictions and characteristics of identity – subjectivity, the state of being a subject, implies agency, yet to be a subject also can mean to be subjected, as well as to be the grammatical subject of a sentence, constructed through language, ideology and processes of.
representation. However, while subjectivity is necessarily subjective, identity works to connect the subjective, or the internal, with the external; identity construction makes connections between who we are, how we imagine ourselves and how we want others to see us.

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In the British higher education system, a mature student is defined as someone who is more than 21 years of age.

For further discussion of the context of Project Her®, see Miller et al. (2000).

PernMUD is one of the text-based, online spaces in which Turkle’s research subjects participated.

To paraphrase: Mr Lover asks why he has not seen Sasha around, and tells her that he likes her and wants to meet up with her because he has something to say to her.

References


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