Discussion Paper

1 **Creating a Self-Image[1]**

2 **Face-Work and Identity Construction Online**

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4 **1 Introduction: Creating a Self-Image online**

5 When discussing self-representation in online spaces, the
6 predominant focus is often on the detrimental effects of a
7 distorted reality that is created by presenting a polished,
8 positive version of oneself only (Turkle 2012; Bedijs, Held &
9 Maaß 2014: 10). From a linguistic point of view, however,
10 there is a lack of systematic investigation and comprehensive
11 analytic and theoretical framework for identity construction
12 online. In this article, we discuss studies that have addressed
13 the topic either explicitly or implicitly and aim to
14 demonstrate that identity construction is skilfully and
15 consciously employed by people engaging in online
16 communication.
17 When investigating identity construction online, it is not
18 only important to consider "Who says what in which channel
19 to whom with which effect?" (Lasswell 1948) but also "with
20 which code?" (Androutsopoulos 2003: 1), code being the
21 linguistic layer of a mediated message. We address these
22 questions and investigate in what way and to what extent
23 social, technical, platform-specific and pragmatic affordances
24 shape online identity construction by analysing the stylistic
25 variation of different user communities, thus leading to a

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26 comprehensive study of the strategies involved: how users
27 stylistically align with an online community, for example
28 Twitter, using self-naming strategies.
29   Identity construction online can be viewed as a form of
30 face-work in Goffmanian sense (Fröhlich 2014) and manifests
31 in a wide-ranging set of practices, e. g. the choice of
32 username (also referred to as screennames or nicknames, cf.
33 Aleksiejuk 2016b), form and content of online profiles and
34 status messages, which contribute to the linguistic positioning
35 of users. The alignment that "speaker and hearers take
36 toward each other and toward the content of their talk"
37 (Goffman 1981: 128) is ever-shifting and are linguistically
38 signalled by the interlocutors (see also Graham 2015).
39   According to Bedijs, Held & Maaß (2014) as well as our
40 own work on username onomastics (Kersten & Lotze 2018,
41 Lotze & Kersten in press), the face-work strategies employed
42 by users on social media are influenced by a desire to
43 connect with other users and an increasing need to preserve
44 privacy and, at least up to a point, anonymity. These
45 conflicting goals of wanting to be recognised as an authentic
46 member of an in-group while retaining a degree of anonymity
47 are, for example, observable in the choice of username (i. e.
48 incorporation of elements of 'real' names, the level of opacity
49 with which this is done and the use of common nouns or
50 other parts of speech communicating specific interests or
51 group memberships). Therefore, usernames are a key factor
52 to consider and analyse in the light of the dilemmas faced
53 when doing face-work online:

54   • the social positioning between private and public
55   discourse (Bedijs, Held & Maaß 2014);
56   • the collapse of contexts online (boyd & Marwick 2011),
57   i. e. the possibility for de- and re-contextualisation of
58   online postings, resulting in the fact that "the exact
59   composition of the audience for any one post is
60   therefore unknowable" (Seargeant & Tagg 2014: 8);
61   • the transformation of all traditional forms of audience
62   design into a new form of face-work online, which is
63   sensitive to the problems of 'privacy vs. authenticity'
64   and 'context collapse'.

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65 In this article we discuss self-naming as a conscious choice of
66 a username (or usernames) and a form of face-work. We
67 understand online self-naming as a key practice in the debate
68 on face-work on social media platforms, because names and
69 naming strategies can be studied more readily than broader
70 and more complex aspects, such as stylistic variation or text-
71 image interdependence, while at the same time forming part
72 of these.

73 1.1 Public Discourse on Authenticity, Transparency and Narcissism
74 in the Digital Age

75 The 'digital revolution' – which has been described as the
76 fourth major media revolution (Schlobinski 2012: 18) – has
77 not only freed global and mobile communication from most
78 of its physical constraints, it has also given permanence to
79 what had hitherto been mostly ephemeral communication.
80 The increased reach of any form of communication and
81 seemingly limitless storage capacity have resulted in entirely
82 new interactional contexts. It has also put the users' privacy
83 at risk in two ways: first, from a (semi-)public audience who
84 can read what was once considered to be private
85 communication and, second, from large-scale data storage
86 and analysis by Silicon Valley companies.
87   This blurring of private and public spheres poses a
88 dilemma for the users: They wish to engage in social
89 interaction on the one hand and they desire to protect one's
90 privacy on the other. The result is a type of face-work
91 (Goffman 1955): how do you communicate when you know
92 that a considerable number of people may be reading along?
93   This question is currently the focus of public debate and is
94 framed either in terms of a compulsion to be authentic in an
95 "Age of Transparency" (Sifry 2011), excessive self-
96 presentation in an "Age of Narcissism" (Durvasula 2016) or as
97 the symptom of a "Narcissism Epidemic" (Twenge &
98 Campbell 2009). Are these new forms of interaction really
99 the driving factor behind the predicament described above or
100 are they actually just all-too familiar human behaviour, albeit
101 in slightly snazzier clothing? In other words, is this new and
102 potentially narcissistic form of face-work really a
103 phenomenon that can be attributed to the rise in social media
104 use?

105 Without wanting to succumb entirely to cultural
106 pessimism, it is important to remember that, from a media
107 studies perspective, social media use can be both a filter and
108 a driver for new ideas and trends. Friend-based social
109 networks and hashtag communities can result in echo
110 chambers and filter bubbles (Hegelich & Shahrezaye 2015)
111 leading to an acceleration of stylistic variation and
112 differentiation. Individuals can become style icons to millions
113 almost overnight and thus gain a tremendous amount of
114 influence, an aspect of which is for example the choice of
115 username.
116 This possibility in turn seems to appeal to certain
117 individuals more than others. A recent comprehensive
118 psychological study by the Hans Bredow Institute using
119 standard narcissism questionnaires (Hölig 2018) found that
120 Twitter users who tweet both frequently and regularly exhibit
121 pronounced narcissistic traits. Hölig (2018) found that only
122 ten percent of Twitter subscribers produce 90 percent of the
123 content and that these particularly active users also score
124 high on the standardised narcissism scale. This begs the
125 question whether the differences between heavy users (i. e.
126 the minority who produces the majority of the content) and
127 the less vocal majority (i. e. those who are predominantly
128 consumers rather than content creators) also manifests in
129 linguistic features (e. g. choice of username, profile data,
130 profile pictures, self-description, pronoun use etc.)
131 Researchers have proposed various criteria for interpreting
132 users' styles. boyd and Marwick (2011), for example,
133 investigated teenagers' online privacy practices and
134 established what could be termed exclusivity by using "in-
135 jokes" and group-specific lexis and positivity by avoiding sad
136 or controversial topics, thus creating a polished, retouched,
137 curated image of themselves (see also Turkle 2012).
138 Other studies found that users create subjectivity and
139 emotionality through conventionalised emoji usage and
140 formulaic group-specific phraseology, often hyperbolic in
141 nature (e. g. *allerallerbeste Freundin* 'absolute best friend
142 ever' or *ich verlass dich nie* 'I'll never leave you'). In a case
143 study of a group of adolescent girls on the now defunct
144 German social media platform SchülerVZ, Voigt (2015a)
145 describes how this group presents themselves as particularly
146 cute and popular by using a specific style (emoticons,

147 iteration of letters, relationship phrases and intensified) and
148 deduces in a general fashion (see Voigt 2015b) that "school
149 girls [sic]" use a new variety of communication online. We
150 would argue that it is impossible to make any general claims
151 based on a single case study and that what is described is,
152 from a sociolinguistic perspective, if anything, a style rather
153 than a variety. This study nevertheless highlights that there is
154 a need for further, more comprehensive and generalizable
155 studies of face-work online which, instead of perpetuating
156 stereotypes, need to be methodologically sound and
157 sufficiently detailed and broad in equal measure.
158   To this end, self-naming can be investigated in regard to
159 the extent with which users conform to a Community of
160 Practice (CoP, Lave & Wenger 1991) and the implicit norms
161 associated with this CoP or, alternatively, how they try to
162 distance themselves from them. As part of a contrastive study
163 (Schlobinski & T. Siever 2018, for a detailed discussion see
164 below) of usernames we compared usernames and self-
165 naming strategies and found such functional similarities,
166 while the structural means to establish a sociolinguistic
167 function differ (Kersten & Lotze 2018), for example in terms
168 of the degree of privacy retained by anonymising usernames
169 or by alignment with a particular group through judicious
170 username choice.

171 1.2 Online Styles

172 This section outlines the current discourse on narcissistic
173 self-presentation online and the state of the art in style
174 analysis, face-work and identity.
175   Both German and English language digitally mediated
176 interaction (DMI) can look back on more than 20 years of
177 academic debate of the linguistic behaviour of users. Despite
178 this, it is still not fully understood which platform-related and
179 socio-pragmatic variables influence the communicative
180 behaviour of users and their engagement in online
181 communities. This may partly be due to the fact that theory
182 generation takes time and is often outpaced by technological
183 change. For the younger generation, a life without social
184 media is inconceivable; even though social media have only
185 become a part of our lives very recently. It is all the more
186 important to work on a more accurate definition of these new

187 social spheres and their communicative agents (to borrow
188 Habermas' [1993] terminology).
189 　　　Following a phase that mainly focused on describing the
190 early internet and its affordances by comparing it to other
191 forms of written communication (English: Herring 1996,
192 German: Runkehl & Schlobinski 1998), researchers began
193 investigating whether the internet gave rise to a new register,
194 the so-called "Netspeak" (Crystal 2001, 2010). The idea of a
195 homogenous online register or style was quickly refuted in
196 light of the diversity of communicative contexts and the
197 heterogeneity of the user groups themselves. Today, the
198 linguistic and multimodal stylistic variants that are present in
199 DMI are viewed as community-specific and as diverse as
200 these communities and their participants.
201 　　　Nevertheless, synchronous written communication can
202 result in the emergence and conventionalisation of certain
203 features, such as the use of emoticons/emojis and
204 morphological or syntactic abbreviations, which in turn are
205 often seen as typical for DMI (see e. g. Baron 2008,
206 Beißwenger 2007, Szurawitzki 2010). The conceptional
207 orality of this type of communication has taken on a
208 prominent role in this context (see e. g. Dürscheid 2007 with
209 reference to Koch & Oesterreicher 1985). Texting or text-
210 speak as a form of synchronous written communication is no
211 longer regarded to be merely a result of the affordances and
212 restrictions imposed by the medium; instead it is regarded to
213 be a reflection of the user's underlying cognitive processes
214 (see e. g. Dürscheid 2016 for an in-depth discussion). The
215 focus of inquiry consequently shifts to the user's experience
216 of online communication in real time and therefore the
217 language of immediacy (as opposed to distance).
218 Consequently, studies of DMI no longer focus only on the
219 medium but also the cognitive dimension of the user
220 experience.
221 　　　The problem with this approach is that communication in
222 the digital age has been defined with recourse to traditional
223 concepts of orality and literacy, which fail to adequately
224 capture this new form of literacy (cf. Androutsopoulos 2007),
225 in particular its multimodality. Consequently, there is a lack
226 of comprehensive definitions of linguistic practices used in
227 the vast variety of online contexts, communities and
228 networks.

229   We argue that any investigation in this field has to be able
230   to adequately capture the fundamental sociological and
231   psychological principles of human action and identity
232   construction (Erikson 1974, Keupp et al. 2002), self-
233   presentation (i. e. face-work, Goffman 1967) and group
234   behaviour within a Community of Practice. Taking into
235   account the basic principles of human interaction and social
236   community is in our view instrumental in uncovering
237   variables that have hitherto not been widely studied and to
238   identify which communicative strategies are simply "old wine
239   in new wineskins" (Dürscheid 2007) and which ones are
240   pivotal and genuinely novel (see also Herring et al. 2013).
241   The first step to do this is to conduct further analyses of
242   identity construction online by investigating the degree to
243   which online identities are constructed by 'writing oneself
244   into being' (through the choice of usernames, profile data and
245   profile pictures) and the effect which this newly crafted
246   existence has on all subsequent communication.
247   The second compounding factor is the loss of clear
248   boundaries between the private and the public (Bedijs, Held
249   & Maaß 2014). Everyone who engages with others online is
250   confronted with the desire for social connection which in
251   turn necessitates at least a degree of authenticity and
252   identifiability on the one hand and the conflicting desire to
253   protect one's privacy by disclosing as little as possible on the
254   other. As a result, there is a broad spectrum of self-naming
255   strategies ranging from utterly opaque usernames, those that
256   consist of common nouns or other parts of speech to the use
257   of one's real names as well as everything in between (Kersten
258   & Lotze 2018, Lotze & Kersten in press). This is just one of
259   numerous examples of the stylistic variation in
260   communicative strategies which have evolved alongside the
261   phenomenon of private communication in a public space.
262   The third factor is the communities the individual does or
263   wants to belong to. Many aspects of face-work and group
264   effects (e. g. filter bubbles and echo chambers) can be linked
265   to the positioning of oneself in relation to other groups.
266   Research has found evidence of adaptation processes in the
267   form of interactive alignment in online communities at both
268   the lexical and syntactic level (for face-to-face dialogues see
269   Pickering & Garrod 2004, for DMI see Lotze 2016). In the
270   case study discussed above, Voigt (2015b) discusses stylistic

271 accommodation among adolescents by shared use of
272 relationship phrases or via emulated prosody (Haase et al.
273 1997), which is represented by the iteration of letters (T.
274 Siever 2006) and emoticon usage. On a functional level, boyd
275 and Marwick (2011) observed a tendency among adolescents
276 to engage in linguistic positivity and emotionality as a
277 reaction to the possibility of any communication on social
278 media potentially being read by others who are not the
279 intended audience. There is also evidence of adaptation
280 strategies in choosing usernames within different
281 Communities of Practice (e. g. Twitter and Flickr: Kersten &
282 Lotze 2018, Facebook and online gaming: Kaziaba 2016, more
283 generally: Aleksiejuk 2017). Alignment with an "in-group"
284 (Tajfel and Turner 1986) can be found at all levels of
285 interaction. With regard to political linguistics/discourse
286 analysis (Twitter: Hegelich & Shahrezaye 2015) and research
287 on linguistic cyberbullying (Marx 2017), there is evidence that
288 valorisation of the in-group can go hand-in-hand with a
289 devalorisation of an out-group in the form of othering and
290 scapegoating (see also Pörksen 2005).
291   The guiding questions are thus the following: How do
292 people 'do naming' when choosing a username to participate
293 in online communication, to what extent is this platform-
294 dependent or motivated by a desire to align with a particular
295 group of users, which strategies are employed to preserve
296 privacy and how do users cope with the conflicting desire to
297 preserve privacy (and therefore anonymity) on the one hand
298 and disclose enough information about themselves to be
299 recognisable (and therefore make themselves partially or fully
300 identifiable)?
301   In the following, we provide an overview of the theoretical
302 concepts of onomastics and digitally-mediated
303 communication research that are relevant for the discussion
304 at hand, focussing in particular on face-work, and relate these
305 to our findings of an analysis of 500 English usernames
306 (Kersten & Lotze 2018) as well as more generally the findings
307 of the a project analysing usernames across 14 languages our
308 data analysis formed part of (Schlobinski & Siever 2018).

309 **2 Naming and Identity Construction**

310 The topics of naming, face-work and stance are closely
311 related to the philosophical topic of the identity of the
312 individual, which in turn is linked to the very essence of
313 human existence. Therefore, the academic discourse on
314 human identity goes back to the beginnings of philosophy
315 and shares links with several other disciplines, such as the
316 psychology of the individual (as well as developmental
317 psychology), social psychology, sociology and linguistics. The
318 following section outlines the theoretical frameworks of
319 identity construction in Western philosophy, sociology and
320 linguistics as well as the relevance of every aspect of these
321 theoretical approaches for onomastics.
322   In Western philosophy, the individual is defined as the
323 very entity which cannot be divided, as discussed in Plato's
324 Cratylus dialogue with reference to the pre-Socratic
325 philosopher Heraclitus. The individual is in union with
326 herself (Latin: *idem* = 'the same'), i. e. in spite of dynamic
327 development, the individual must recognize herself everyday
328 as one indivisible entity (both qualitatively and numerically).
329 This indivisible being is referred to by a name which is (at
330 least ideally) mono-referential, i. e. has one unique referent
331 (cf. Nübling et al. 2015, Hansack 2004). The being is able to
332 reflect on their inner identity via their consciousness, which
333 is what John Locke calls the 'self' (Locke, Essay: II, 27, 8). It is
334 this capacity of critical self-reflection that makes the
335 individual a rational agent in the Kantian sense who is
336 ethically responsible for their actions (Kant, MdS VI 223).
337 This in turn can be related back to onomastics, because an
338 official name typically refers to an authentic person with
339 rights and duties (see e. g. Lettmaier 2015 on the legal aspects
340 of names in the UK, Lawson 2016, Nübling et al. 2015).
341   In more recent times, the constructivist school shifted the
342 focus from the individual's inner conscious experience of
343 identity to the inter-personal construction of identity. While
344 a radical form of constructivism could be criticized as being
345 relativistic, the idea of identity as a process rather than a
346 product has proven to be fruitful in a wide range of
347 disciplines. Following this line of reasoning, identity is subject
348 to interactional negotiation and is therefore a social

349 construct, which in turn is symbolically transmitted (Mead
350 1978).
351   In post-modern approaches identity is seen as a
352 'patchwork' of partial identities that are relevant for different
353 aspects of one's life (e. g. me as an academic, me as a singer).
354 In onomastics, this is then linked to the idea that a person can
355 have more than one name (e. g. a family name, one or more
356 given names, pet names, pseudonyms, usernames etc.; see
357 e. g. Hansack 2004).
358   As discussed above, the concept of social identity
359 construction is closely related to Goffman's (1967) notion of
360 face-work, because we do not necessarily show each other
361 our true, authentic, inner-most selves, but rather a more
362 polished version, a mask for social interaction, which
363 Goffman refers to as the social "face". Using empirical
364 methods, we can only ever really tap into a speaker's face-
365 work, not their identity and we argue that self-naming
366 practices online are a form of such face-work.
367   Face as a person's social value can also be negotiated
368 linguistically. This negotiation process can be interpreted
369 with Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) "principle of emergence" as
370 "doing identity". In onomastics, online naming is also seen as
371 a negotiated process ("doing naming", see Aldrin 2011).
372   Following Bucholtz & Hall (2005), this can be viewed as
373 the positioning of the individual in relation to an online
374 community, which in turn is a CoP. The username can
375 indicate whether the individual is part of an in-group (Tajfel
376 & Turner 1986) of insiders with regards to a specific topic, a
377 fandom etc. while at the same time excluding outsiders by
378 referencing a topic, a fandom etc. which only the initiated
379 would be able to recognize ("principle of positionality",
380 "principle of indexicality").
381   Consequently, in our analysis of online identity
382 construction we adopt the post-modern view of identity as a
383 patchwork of partial identities which are negotiated in
384 relation to a CoP and the basic principles of linguistic
385 construction of identity as defined by Bucholtz and Hall
386 (2005) "emergence", "positionality", "indexicality",
387 "relationality" and "partialness":

388   •   Emergence: Identity is understood to be the result of
389   an interactive negotiation process and can thus be

390   interpreted in the context of an interactive doing
391   (doing gender, doing identity) approach.
392   • Positionality: Identity is constituted as a function of
393   spatial and temporal variables as studied by traditional
394   ethnography (diatopic and diachronic variation).
395   • Indexicality: The process of identity construction is
396   indexical, which means that identity is constituted in
397   relation to social groups to which one refers with
398   certain culturally grown linguistic means (labels, style
399   characteristics).
400   • Relationality: Identity is replaced by concrete semantic
401   relations such as similarity, difference, naturalness vs.
402   artificiality or power vs. impotence constituted, e. g.
403   through by self-staging as authoritative.
404   • Partialness: Because identity is intersubjectively
405   constituted, it is always only partially experienceable,
406   interpretable etc. and therefore agentivity is
407   fundamentally collaborative.

408   Name choice can also be interpreted as a partial aspect of the
409   identity constitution of an individual. As a sociolinguistically
410   relevant practice, name choice could be understood to be an
411   interactive negotiation process ('doing naming', see also
412   Aldrin 2011). Furthermore, name choice often includes a
413   temporal or spatial positioning relative to a group
414   (fashionable names, regional names). Names refer indexically
415   to social groups (see Nübling 2017: Charlotte vs. Chantal).
416   Even self-naming practices can be interpreted semantically in
417   relation to certain relevant topoi (e. g. self-representation as
418   authentic by using one's real name on social media); name
419   choice is thus a genuinely collaborative, only partially
420   controllable process that involves choices between names
421   that have been bestowed on ones ('real' names, nicknames)
422   and self-naming (nicknames, pseudonyms).
423   To break down the concepts mentioned above and to
424   systematise the explanation of empirical data on self-naming
425   online we posit four main principles of onomastic identity
426   construction as a useful framework of interpretation. These
427   are:

428   • the use of names to establish mono-referentiality to a
429   unique referent (Nübling et al. 2015)

430   • names as a means to model the human consciousness
431   (following Locke)
432   • names as a device to authenticate oneself as a rational
433   agent with a concept of ethical responsibility (following
434   Kant)
435   • the use of names to position the individual in relation
436   to social groups (Bucholtz & Hall 2005)

437   In the following section, we discuss our own research
438   findings on online self-naming as well as those of others. This
439   is mainly done in the light of these main principles of
440   onomastic identity construction following the broader
441   concepts of online face-work with its restrictions and
442   affordances (see Bedijs, Held & Maaß 2014, Tagg 2015) and
443   identity construction as "doing identity" following Bucholtz
444   and Hall (2005) in relation to Communities of Practice (Lave
445   & Wenger 1991).

3 Self-Naming Online as Face-Work

3.1 New Parameters for Face-Work Online

448   It can be argued that people have always striven to put the
449   best foot forward and to present themselves in the most
450   positive light possible. Radford et al. (2011: 447), for example,
451   discuss the way in which users "actively create and maintain
452   face" in Live Chat Reference Interactions, even though it is a
453   very goal-directed form of interaction. They also note that,
454   although some have argued that digitally-mediated
455   communication (DMI) is inherently levelling and democratic,
456   since all clues about ethnicity, gender etc. are supposedly
457   absent, this is not actually the case since cues are derived
458   from e. g. email addresses and other types of username
459   (Radford et al. 2011).
460   As discussed above, the digital revolution has led to a
461   blurring of the boundaries between private and public
462   spheres, which in turn leads to the conundrum the users of
463   social media find themselves in, namely that between
464   authenticity and anonymity. These are conflicting goals, in
465   particular the desire to remain anonymous and the fact that
466   users cannot be sure who is reading their contributions,

467 which make it difficult to identify the audiences (Graham
468 2015) on the one hand, and the need to provide important
469 identity cues to the co-participants on the other. Graham
470 (2015) also notes that as interlocutors grow more comfortable
471 with each other they may disclose more about themselves,
472 thus reducing their anonymity and privacy. She also argues
473 that the degree of control who the audience is is intricately
474 linked to how users choose to present themselves. One
475 strategy to potentially retain a level of control is to
476 compromise in terms of self-naming by combining parts of
477 one's 'real' name with other group- or platform-specific lexis,
478 since a username, "as the first interaction a person has with a
479 platform, sets the tone for how communication and content
480 flows through platforms" (Van der Nagel 2018: 312).
481   While it has been argued that the online sphere could be
482 described as the stage in the Goffmanian sense and the offline
483 life as backstage (see e. g. Bullingham & Vasconcelos 2013),
484 this differentiation may not be feasible in the light of blurred
485 boundaries between online and offline communication. On
486 the other hand, the strategies described above alone may not
487 be enough to be perceived to be an authentic person: Angouri
488 (2015) discusses an example in which one of the participants
489 in a forum dispute makes a clear distinction between a
490 'username' and a 'real' person, stating that "besides I am
491 addressing a username [nickname in the Greek original] not
492 someone I personally know, we are kept apart by the
493 interface! :)" (Angouri 2015: unpaginated ebook). The user in
494 question may potentially feel this way because the other user
495 did not disclose enough information about themselves
496 through their username.
497   In the context of data protection during ethnographic
498 studies, Varis (2015) goes so far as to argue that usernames
499 and avatars should not be regarded as not being real names,
500 since they are used to present oneself online and should
501 therefore be protected just like any other kind of personal
502 data. Furthermore, Varis (2015) posits that the distinction
503 between usernames and 'real' names is rooted in the notion
504 that the internet is somehow less 'real' that the offline world.
505 Users often perceive others they communicate with online as
506 friends and, as discussed above, the lines between on- and
507 offline worlds become increasingly blurred. There is
508 evidence of careful management of usernames (e. g. Thomas

509 2007, Gatson 2011, Hagström 2012), the days in which
510 usernames were regarded to be mostly ad hoc creations
511 without much meaning are long gone (Bechar-Israeli 1995,
512 Kaziaba 2013).
513   Many users use the same or similar usernames across
514 different platforms and contexts (Varis 2015), leading to
515 conscious use of the affordances and constraints of the
516 platforms used, meaning that "people are better able to
517 strategically self-present through the platforms they choose"
518 (Van der Nagel 2017: 314) and make informed choices on how
519 much they disclose when, where and to which perceived
520 audience, which Van der Nagel (2017: 326) likens to "what in
521 a professional arena would be an audience segmentation
522 strategy", which could be interpreted to be a strategy to
523 counteract context collapse. The important point here is that
524 the technical affordances are "possibilities of action" (Van der
525 Nagel 2017: 314), even if some encourage the use of 'real'
526 names, which users are also known to circumvent, for
527 example in the data from the study discussed in more detail
528 below (Kersten & Lotze 2018), people filled in the box
529 requiring them to disclose their location with anywhere or
530 not telling. Users therefore seem to strive for at least a
531 modicum of control over context collapse and one way in
532 which they address this is the choice of username.
533   A study of usernames in an online dating context
534 (Bullingham & Vasconcelos 2013: 18) found that usernames
535 "can, in Goffman's terms, act as a personal front" creating a
536 reaction in other users, for example when asked to rate the
537 attractiveness of users based on their usernames. Similarly, if
538 a username exhibits a trait that is not desirable in a particular
539 communicative context (e. g. a username suggestive of
540 masculinity in a chatroom frequented by and meant for
541 lesbians), the users may face rejection (Del-Tesio-Craviotto
542 2008).
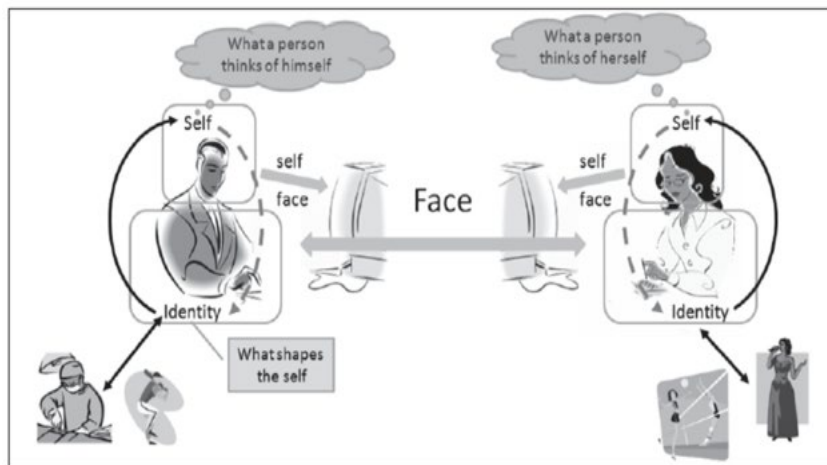
Figure 1: Notions of identity, self and face in DMI (Fröhlich 2014: 117)

As outlined above, we differentiate between the identity of a person as a unit in a patchwork of partial identities, the self as a self-reflexive component in the form of a self-aware being, and the social face which is presented in interaction (cf. Fröhlich 2014).

3.2 Empirical Studies: The International Nickname Project

To illustrate our argument that username choice does indeed constitute a form of face-work and that names are negotiated, we will refer to results of our empirical study on usernames which combined a quantitative corpus study on the lexis, syntax and morphology of online names with a qualitative questionnaire on the motivation of name choices. As part of this study, we adopted an onomastic approach by investigating whether users tend to give their actual, i. e. 'real', names (as in anthroponyms) on a platform or rather opt for other naming strategies, such as non-transparent appellatives, short forms of their names or childhood nicknames.

3.2.1 Quantitative Analysis of Usernames

Research design: For the corpus study on the structure of usernames, we collected 500 usernames from predominantly British online platforms. This was done as part of a larger project analysing self-naming practices across 14 different languages and cultures (Schlobinski & T. Siever 2018), among which are German, Italian, Swedish, Japanese and Chinese. All project teams used a common tag-set of those categories

571 that were comparable across languages (onomastic categories,
572 lexical-semantic categories). During tagging, language-
573 specific or other additional criteria could be added. This
574 shared tagset approach was used because specific software
575 for automatic analyses and contrastive comparison was
576 developed specifically for the project to ensure a level of
577 comparability across languages (for more detailed
578 information, including a discussion of the tagset, see
579 Schlobinski & Siever 2018).

580   The British usernames were collected from a variety of
581 different social media sites (Twitter, Flickr, two types of
582 below-the-line comments, one on current TV programmes in
583 a broadsheet, the other on political articles in the yellow
584 press, and forum threads from a tech forum; 100 names from
585 each) to gain insights into self-naming strategies used in a
586 predominantly UK context (for a detailed discussion of how
587 this was achieved, see Kersten & Lotze 2018). To facilitate
588 comparability, the other language corpora were built from
589 the same sources where possible. If certain platforms were
590 unavailable in specific countries, another service with similar
591 functions and popularity was chosen in its stead (e. g.
592 Chinese: Weibo in place of Twitter).

593 **Results:** In the following paragraphs real names are
594 anonymised with the asterisk sign (*) due to the conventions
595 of the international nickname project.

596   57.4% of all British usernames in the corpus are what was
597 classed as transparent pseudonyms; i. e. they either don't
598 contain any 'real' name (*mooncarrot*), they clearly are not the
599 user's real name (*Gregor Samsa*), they contain company,
600 product or group names in addition to anthroponyms
601 (pattern: *FN LN Photography* on Flickr) or consist of language
602 play based on anthroponyms (*mariolensa*, a combination of
603 the name the singer and 1940/50s film star Mario Lanza and
604 the appellative *lens*). The other names were full or short
605 versions of personal names. 55% of all names are compounds
606 following Nübling et al.'s (2015) categorisation of the
607 combination of first name and last name as compounding. For
608 example, *Saskia Kersten* would be analysed as a compound
609 (on the morphologic level) not as a noun phrase in form of an
610 apposition (syntactic level). 11.6% contain word play (e. g.
611 mimicking anthroponyms: *BillyGoat75*, *A Breeze* or

612 exploiting homophony: *eye pad*, *SereniTEA*). 73% of all
613 usernames exhibit unconventional orthography (omission of
614 spaces / use of delimiter [*@Favstar_Bot*] or a deliberate use
615 of capitals [*CrazyWitchLady*], which can be readily explained
616 by the technical constraints of the platforms that e. g. do not
617 allow spaces to be incorporated in usernames, forcing the
618 users to resort to other strategies of indicating word
619 boundaries instead. 33% of all usernames make use of
620 graphostylistics, i. e. numbers or other strategies often
621 regarded to be 'typical' of DMI (> 1%, *Fruit Bat /\0/*).

622 *3.2.2 Qualitative Analysis of Self-Naming Practices*

623 In spring/summer 2017, we collected qualitative data on self-
624 naming practices using a questionnaire[2], in order to better
625 understand the motives behind choosing a nickname and to
626 tap into username choice in the light of different
627 communities of practice. 71 participants were asked about
628 their self-naming practices and the motivation behind their
629 choice of username, the nature of which informants could
630 disclose as vaguely or specifically as they wished to retain
631 their privacy. Informants could also ask for their actual
632 usernames not to be included in any publications; the
633 examples below are therefore ones that informants gave
634 permission to be used. Most of them were students based in
635 the UK (78.9% female, 74.6% male) with an age between 19
636 and 23 years.
637 As part of this study, 121 usernames with explanations of
638 how and why these were chosen were collected in total in an
639 open questionnaire design, which was part of the
640 international nickname project. The students were able to fill
641 in more than one name, if they used different ones on
642 different platforms.
643 We clustered the usernames together with their
644 motivations of name choice along three continua: a)
645 Authenticity and Anonymity, b) Individualisation and Group
646 Convergence, and c) Phonic and Graphic Aesthetics. The
647 interpretation of self-naming practices on these continua was
648 driven by the insight that users see the decision between
649 personal authenticity or anonymity on the web not as a
650 dichotomous choice between incorporating their full name or

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2 UH Ethics protocol no. EDU/SF/UH/02698

651 a completely opaque username but rather came up with
652 interesting compromises.
653   The continuum in this model is solely based on the
654 cognitive level of name choice. Users do not decide between
655 two categories, but choose from a range of different variants
656 between two poles. We understand the choices themselves as
657 fluid. At the morphological and syntactic level of the names
658 chosen, these choices manifest in concrete word forms or
659 constructions that may contain more or fewer elements of the
660 sematic domains of the two decision poles (full name,
661 nickname from childhood, nickname from childhood + real
662 age, real first name + appellative addend, etc.). User choices
663 can be very creative, therefore the view that this is a
664 continuum, not a scale with discrete increments.

665 **Authenticity-Anonymity Continuum:** 59% of usernames
666 appear to be (at least in part) real names. 27% of usernames
667 do not contain any element of their real name (*giraffesocks*)
668 with a typical explanation being "don't give my full name on a
669 large platform". The affordances of the platforms for which
670 the username is created seem to lead to different strategies of
671 name choice, since the users face the authenticity/privacy
672 dilemma and context collapse. 14% of usernames can be
673 interpreted to reflect strategies of compromise, because they
674 contain initials, middle names or childhood nicknames that
675 are only transparent to an in-group.

676 **Individualisation-Group Convergence Continuum:** Most
677 of the participants mentioned some form of identity work in
678 relation to the online community in question (see Seargeant
679 & Tagg 2014). *DARK_ eXtreme* chose this name for a gaming
680 platform "to indicate I was part of a group". And
681 *PrincessMonoko* wants to show that they are part of a manga
682 fandom and thus attract other fans because "we share similar
683 info and content". Consequently, in this case the name itself
684 is seen as aiding in creating a group similar to hashtag
685 communities (see *fluid community*, Seargeant & Tagg 2014),
686 that constitute around hashtags because users are attracted by
687 the hashtag (other than e. g. "node communities", that built
688 around a user, who befriends the others). This name choice
689 can be interpreted as a practice of authentication to an in-
690 group and, therefore, as face-work.

691 **Phonic-Graphic Aesthetics Continuum:** Another
692 important criterion in choosing a username is the perceived
693 aesthetics of a name with regard to its sound or typeface (cf.
694 Aldrin 2011). Which structural characteristics of a name are
695 judged to be aesthetically pleasing depends largely on social
696 factors (Nübling 2017), although personal preference may also
697 play a role (see e. g. Silva & Topolinski 2018). Against the
698 background of the discourse on conceptual orality in the
699 written medium of the internet, two poles for the aesthetic
700 design of nicknames seem to emerge: a phonic and a graphic
701 one, which in turn is intertwined with the other continua,
702 particularly the Authenticity-Anonymity continuum.

703 For example, some users see online communication as
704 conceptually oral (see Dürscheid 2003), which is also evident
705 in their choice of nickname. The user named *silkrivers*, for
706 example, describes their nickname as "a combination of
707 euphonic sounding words".

708 By contrast, others focus on the visual aesthetics of the
709 typeface and use features of this new form of literacy (see
710 Androutsopoulos 2007). The Twitter user named
711 *@m****l****xo* attaches the xo-emoticon to her first and
712 middle name and explains: "'xo' looks nice".

713 We believe that analysing linguistic strategies on the basis
714 of decision continua which are shaped by the affordances and
715 restrictions of the respective medium and the communicative
716 needs of the users would be extremely fruitful for future
717 studies. Aside from usernames, this can serve as a stepping
718 stone for systematising other aspects of online face-work in
719 relation to the medium or channel. These decision continua
720 represent an important starting point for interpreting the
721 usernames.

722 *3.2.3 Self-Naming Practices in Other Language Contexts*

723 As part of the international nickname project, a comparable
724 (as far as context allowed) questionnaire studies were carried
725 out for seven languages in addition to English: German,
726 Swedish, Luxembourgish, Croatian, Japanese, Chinese and
727 (Moroccan) Arabic (see Schlobinski & Siever 2018). The
728 results of these are similar in many aspects, but also show
729 clear differences relevant for the interpretation of self-
730 naming as a sociolinguistic practice. In particular, regarding
731 the inclusion of 'real' names in usernames, i. e. decision

732 making along the continuum of authentication and
733 anonymization, clear trends and differences emerge.
734   Whether (parts of) the users' actual names are included
735 differs greatly depending on the cultural context: Arabic
736 (Tahiri 2018, see chapter 1 in Schlobinski & Siever 2018),
737 Swedish (Siebold 2018, chapter 13), Luxembourgish (Conrad
738 2018, chapter 9) and Croatian (Mathias & Pavić Pintarić 2018,
739 chapter 8) users' choices are very similar to those of English
740 user, as their usernames contain authentic anthroponyms in
741 59% of usernames. In the German study, only 40% of
742 usernames contained anthroponyms. In the Japanese study
743 (Oberwinkler 2018, chapter 6) 20% of the usernames
744 contained anthroponyms, of which only 11.7% are (most
745 likely) surnames. And the analysis of the Chinese platform
746 Weibo (Zhu & Zhang 2018, chapter 2) found that only 12.4%
747 of usernames contain anthroponyms, 8% of which appear to
748 be surnames.
749   How much information (i. e. how many clues as to what
750 the real name of a user is) is given therefore differs greatly
751 across different cultural contexts. For example, Oberwinkler
752 (2018: 166), who analysed the Japanese usernames, discuss a
753 study by Orita and Miuri: "In Japan, it is often avoided to
754 specify your own proper name on the internet. One can
755 speak of a widespread resentment (see Orita & Miuri 2011,
756 Orita 2009)". Positive identity work in Japan is potentially
757 more about anonymization than about authentication and
758 thus favours one end of the Authenticity-Anonymity
759 continuum. Here, as is so often the case, cultural differences
760 are important for the interpretation of the data (Spencer-
761 Oatey 2005). The fact that only very few authentic names are
762 used on the Weibo platform in China has to be interpreted in
763 the context of the political climate as a potential reaction to
764 the policing of digital spaces.

765 3.3 Self-naming Practices Online

766 As argued above, the analysis of self-naming practices on
767 social media strongly suggests that they are a form of face-
768 work. However, for a better understanding of the complex
769 sociolinguistic practices that accompany face-work, we need
770 to include the restrictions and affordances of the respective
771 platform in the interpretation: the dilemma of authenticity

772 and anonymity (Bedijs, Held & Maaß 2014), the collapse of
773 concrete and shared contexts (boyd & Marwick 2011, Wesch
774 2008) and the users' ability to de-contextualise and re-
775 contextualise. The following section outlines how the Four
776 Principles of Onomastic Identity Construction can be
777 transferred to the study of naming practices in online
778 environments.

779 *3.3.1 The Four Principles of Online Naming*

780 *3.3.1.1 Mono-Referentiality*

781 Names differ from common nouns in that they ideally have
782 only one referent in a particular context, while common
783 nouns can have many referents. In onomastics, mono-
784 referentiality is not necessarily absolute, because two or more
785 people can share the same name.

786   However, technical restrictions of a particular platform can
787 lead to a need to create a unique, truly mono-referential
788 username. Twitter, for example, has a specific help page
789 addressing, among other things, what to do when a username
790 is already taken; they recommend the use of an underscore,
791 which is one of a number of strategies that users apply – in
792 particular if the username contains the users' real name
793 (components) (see e. g. Hämäläinen 2013). In these cases,
794 numbers or special characters are often found as additions to
795 the anthroponymic components, as is variation of spelling or
796 the combination of the name with other lexis. If this
797 username uniqueness is generated by adding numbers, age or
798 the year of birth is often preferred over consecutive
799 numbering. Nübling et al. (2015) discusses the de-humanising
800 nature of numbering in humans against the background of the
801 common practice of numbering livestock. In livestock as well
802 as in scientific laboratory animals name uniqueness is
803 generated by assigning numbers, because the context
804 demands maximum individualization – similar to the
805 technology of the online platform that enforces name
806 uniqueness. But in contrast to livestock, users choose their
807 numbers freely. There is tentative evidence that the inclusion
808 of numbers does not, for example, influence the "in-out
809 effect" (Silva & Topolinski 2018), but how exactly numbers in
810 usernames are perceived by other users outside marketing

811 and psychological research has to our knowledge not been
812 studied extensively.

3.3.1.2 Self-Representation

814 In older publications the potential to be able to perform a
815 certain partial identity through a screenname is often
816 regarded to be a driving factor (e. g. Bechar-Israeli 1995,
817 Kaziaba 2013) with the username thus being a vehicle of
818 (emotional) self-expression. This aspect may become less
819 relevant in Web 2.0, not least because the boundaries
820 between online and offline are becoming increasingly
821 blurred. In online gaming, however, there are numerous
822 examples of usernames being used for the expression of
823 partial identities (see Bainbridge 2010).
824 　　What is important to many users, however, is that they like
825 the online name themselves. They consciously or
826 subconsciously follow an aesthetic principle, which in turn is
827 also a form of self-expression.
828 　　One motivation behind a name choice of users who choose
829 a creative name incorporating e. g. appellatives is thus to
830 follow an aesthetic principle. What is perceived as aesthetic
831 is highly subjective, trends within a given CoP and the
832 cognitive concept of graphic or phonic aesthetics. In order to
833 devise a creative name in written media, test subjects are
834 often influenced by an orality-oriented concept of
835 communication (see Dürscheid 2003). For example,
836 *melancholypeach* explained their choice of name by stating "I
837 like the flow of it", although the name is likely to be written
838 and read more often than spoken out loud.

3.3.1.3 Authentication vs. Anomymisation

840 The use of real names can be considered as a special kind of
841 authentication practice that emphasizes the offline self (see
842 Jacobson 1996, Lindholm 2013), so that the users thus identify
843 themselves as persons with rights and obligations and in
844 order to express closeness.
845 　　The information on strategies employed when choosing
846 usernames provided by the informants of our survey of
847 students based in the UK show that it is a multi-layered and
848 multi-dimensional decision-making process. The informants
849 consistently stated that this strategy is used to make their
850 account easier to find for friends and family. Others

851 expressed the view that a higher degree of transparency (i. e.
852 offering at least the potential of being able to relate it back to
853 a real person in an offline context) when choosing names is a
854 sign of openness and authenticity. Many users settle on a
855 compromise between others being able to recognise them
856 through a higher degree of 'onymicity' and the protection of
857 privacy through the choice of more opaque appellatives.
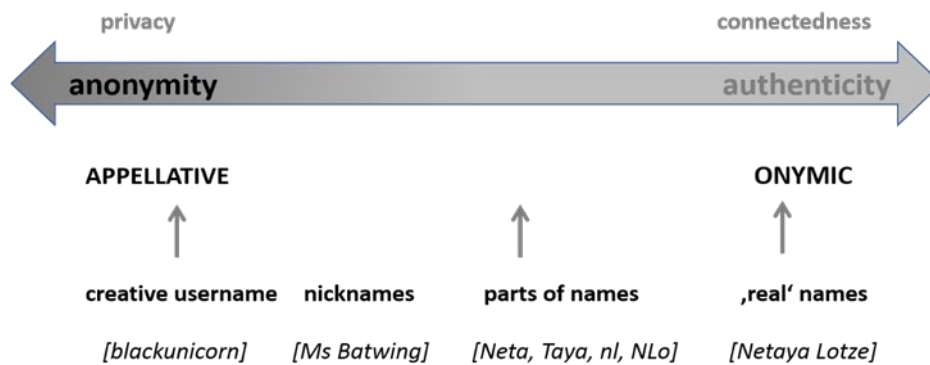
858

859 **Figure 2:** Decision continuum between anonymity and authenticity when
860 choosing usernames.

861 In cases where users decide to adopt a different gender or
862 ethnicity in an online environment such as *Second Life*, this
863 has been described as a utilization of the "potential for
864 anonymity" and "identity tourism" (Bullingham &
865 Vasconcelos 2013: 103). Anonymity through adopting a
866 pseudonym that bears no relation to the offline self has also
867 been described as a driving force for users who write under
868 difficult political circumstances or on topics generally
869 regarded to be taboo (Aleksiejuk 2016a, 2016b). In a survey by
870 Swennen (2001, cited in Aleksiejuk 2016b: 452) more than
871 half of the participants stated that the driving factor behind
872 choosing a pseudonym, i. e. a non-transparent username, was
873 preservation of anonymity. Similarly, in a study by
874 Hämälainen (2013) where participants were asked to rate
875 usernames, a majority rated nontransparent, mysterious
876 usernames as 'good' usernames.
877   In many contexts, however, an opaque username that
878 preserves anonymity may be perceived as suspicious
879 (Hagström 2012, Heisler & Crabill 2006) with the absence of
880 authenticating cues being interpreted as suspicious and
881 potentially fraudulent.

882 *3.3.1.4 Individualisation vs. Group Convergence*

883 Identity work in online communities is inherently relevant to
884 users' sociolinguistic practices in online environments (see
885 e. g. Seargeant & Tagg 2014 on identity and community
886 online) and group effects such as adaptation and
887 differentiation play an important role in this context (see
888 theories on social identity, Tajfel & Turner 1986). Choosing
889 an appropriate username, e. g. on Twitter, Facebook,
890 YouTube or online gaming platforms, is a form of self-
891 presentation and a means of authenticating oneself as a
892 member of a CoP. The goals of self-presentation vary
893 according to the group and individual. For example, Kaziaba
894 (2016: 24-25) finds in the ego-shooter *Counterstrike*
895 particularly frequent names related to the game content
896 (*Feuerengel* 'fire angel', *Terminator*) as well as their persiflage
897 from a satirical distance (*Affe mit Waffe* 'monkey with a
898 weapon', *Stirb!* 'Die!'). Evidence for this was provided by our
899 own study on usernames and the stylistics of youth languages
900 and group-related slang (Lotze, Sprengel & Zimmer 2015). For
901 the Gothic forum *nachtwelten.de* we find 'mystical' names
902 with (also partly ironic) references to Gothic subculture
903 (*mindshaper*, *Spooky*, *carpe_noctem*). Feature clusters can
904 also be found in Stommel's (2007) study of nicknames in
905 forums about eating disorders: users prefer e. g. usernames
906 that connote lightness, small size or childishness. In a similar
907 vein, Lindholm (2013) analysed usernames of two forums, one
908 on parenthood and one on photography and found that many
909 usernames in the parenting forum emphasize motherhood
910 and femininity (with over a third of usernames in the data
911 explicitly relating to the parenting theme), whereas in the
912 photography forum there were also usernames that index
913 masculinity and less than 10% of usernames were explicitly
914 photography related.

915   The four principles of online naming are not mutually
916 exclusive, but rather go hand in hand, since they essentially
917 describe human identity work on different levels: unity with
918 oneself and a mono-referential name, self-expression of
919 partial identities, authentication as a rational agent, and group
920 behaviour.

921   We argue that all of the above is face-work and that there
922 appear to be discernible strategies that are perpetuated in

923 certain CoPs or by specific individuals and potentially
924 depend on the technical affordances of the respective
925 platforms which warrant further investigation. Users "actively
926 negotiate the material features, or boxes, buttons, and menus,
927 of platforms" (Van der Nagel 2017: 326). This means that there
928 has to be media competence to negotiate the complex terrain
929 of social media which is also worthy of further analysis.

930 **4 Conclusion**

931 We understand online self-naming as a complex and dynamic
932 socio-linguistic practice of authentication or anonymisation,
933 which can be understood as face-work in Goffman's sense.
934   If screennames are interpreted as the positioning of the
935 individual to the community with respect to a shared
936 semantic inventory, they cannot be denied a communicative
937 character. But how interactive is linguistic identity work
938 online (principle of emergence, see Bucholtz & Hall 2005)?
939 The social face was often interpreted as a subject of
940 negotiation in the context of relationship work (see Locher &
941 Watts 2005). But how are names negotiated in online
942 communities? Androutsopoulos (2006: 525) defines
943 screennames as "acts of self-presentation that are designed
944 and presented to, rather than negotiated with, an audience".
945 More recently, naming is viewed more like a dynamic than a
946 static concept in onomastics. Evidence comes from studies on
947 name choice in parents (Aldrin 2011) and the transgender
948 community (Schmidt-Jüngst 2018), where names are
949 discussed, tested and altered when transitioning from one
950 gender to another.
951   When parents name their child, this is usually a dynamic,
952 interactive and highly recursive process in which different
953 possible names are discussed (compare Aldrin 2011).
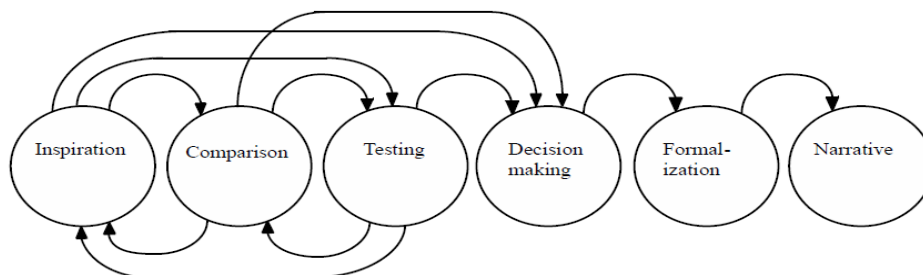
954

955 **Figure 3:** The process of personal naming (Aldrin 2011: 394)

956 So, to which degree is self-naming online and self-naming in
957 general a negotiated practice? There is evidence for
958 communities in which the name choice is commented on and
959 discussed by the group, which sometimes leads to a change of
960 name (Bechar-Israeli 1995, Gatson 2011, Lindholm 2013; for
961 gaming: see Bainbridge 2010, Kaziaba 2013, 2018). And in our
962 survey, the vast majority of participants points to some form
963 of name negotiation or change of username in analogy to
964 Aldrin (2011) and Schmidt-Jüngst (2018). This suggests that the
965 principle of emergence after Bucholtz & Hall (2005) applies
966 to online naming, too. However, studies that closely analyse
967 the interactive nature of identity work through usernames are
968 still missing; something that we hope will be remedied soon,
969 not least because Goffman's notions of *face* and *face-work*
970 are ideally suited to illuminate this area of DMI.

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