

Username and Identity Construction on RuNet as Seen in the Example of the Posidelki ('Gatherings') Forum

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Abstract

Anthroponyms in virtual environments function as primary devices used to construct, validate, and assess identity. Studies of themed environments have revealed a connection between the context and identities, demonstrated in recurrent patterns in name selection. For example, Stommel (2007), in “‘Mein Nick bin ich!’ Nicknames in a German Forum on Eating Disorders”, reveals frequent references to recognisable attributes of anorexia—such as smallness, weightlessness, and childishness—while Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008), in ‘Gender and Sexual Identity Authentication in Language Use’, reports that in dating chat-rooms participants’ names often feature desirable physical attributes of stereotypical male and female identities, in order to construct images of attractive bodies. In contrast, *Posidelki* (‘Gatherings’), a non-themed social forum on the Russian-speaking Internet, is not addressed to any specific category of participant, or restricted to a particular purpose of communication, and therefore lacks such a clear context-related point of reference. In this environment independent clusters of usernames can be observed, which display varied concepts of identities—revealing both national and foreign influences, and expressing attachment to tradition as well as an aspiration to be up to date with worldly trends which can be seen as a sign of the process of identity re-definition in the post-Soviet era.

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Identity and Self-Presentation

I would like to demonstrate how usernames can be read as elements of identity construction on the Internet, and what role they play in this process.

The general concept of identity applied in this paper is that identity is not to be treated as a source of, or an explanation for, the course of the interaction or behaviours of interactants, but rather as a product. It is not that we have identities which make us behave in certain ways, but rather that we act in certain ways to construct one or another identity. To do so, we may act in such a way as to display characteristics that are associated with specific categories that people are typically ascribed to, and in this way promote identities that we find relevant in a specific context. For example, the category of ‘cabin crew’ may assign certain attributes to the persons so labelled, such as being polite, knowledgeable about aircraft safety, well-travelled, following a specific dress-code, etc. And this can be reversed: if you look and behave in a certain way, you might be taken to be a member of the ‘cabin crew’ category. Identity might constitute the final accomplishment of a performance, or an identity might be performed in order to achieve some other outcome (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998: 2-4).

People may construct their identities by means of self-presentation, which might be described as the intentional public performance that Goffman (1959) has compared to performance on the stage. It might be realised by linguistic and non-linguistic means: by speech and gesture, the way one dresses, the places one visits, the people one knows, and by making use of any other social and cultural resources – depending on the desired effect, available resources, properties of the current channel of communication and other circumstances in which the communication takes place (Goffman 1959: 11, 14-15, 23). The same is true for virtual identities, except that these are constructed mainly linguistically, as the cues that are provided by our bodies in face-to-face interactions are typically absent on-line.

Usernames and Identity

The character of usernames as linguistic phenomena, their place in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), and their relationship with identity have been conceptualised in various ways.

For example, in Del-Teso-Craviotto's (2008: 254) study of English- and Spanish-speaking dating chat-rooms, usernames have been shown to be a means to authenticate¹ participants' gender. Gender identity is particularly important in dating chat-rooms because the understanding of sexual desire is typically linked to a specified gender. As the manifestation of gender identity typically takes place through the body, usernames are employed to represent participants' bodies. The performance of gender identity as a bodily sign might occur through displaying characteristics that are stereotypically associated with, or desirable in, a specific gender. Usernames commonly function as representations of gendered bodies by direct or indirect references to traits that are found to be attractive in members of a certain gender.

Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008: 255-258) has noticed a number of recurrent strategies applied in usernames to achieve the above-mentioned effects, which includes both explicit indications of gender—e.g. the 'age/sex/location schema' (*MsGaPeach35* 'Ms Georgia Peach35', *TiO18Mad* 'guy 18 Madrid'), grammatical indications of gender (*diablito18769* 'little male devil 18769', *gata00001* 'female cat 00001'), and other indications (e.g. *Diamondboy02*, *ELHOMBRE157* 'the man 157', *IVANN_22*, *LVNVCowboy*)—as well as indirect indications, such as references to body parts associated with attractive gendered bodies, e.g. *rubia peligrosa6* 'dangerous blonde 6', *TRUEblonde821*, *blueeyescs*, *SoftNSweetLips*, as well as animal bodies, or any other objects that may represent attributes commonly recognised as desirable in members of a certain gender, e.g. *BIGBADBLUEDOG*, *DarrellRooster5*, *DRMMMYAngel*, *HOTAZHEAT88*, *sirenital* 'mermaid 1'. Del-Teso-Craviotto has noted, for example, that females often present themselves as cats: *gata00001*, *A kitty kat 4 u*, *TAMED SEX KITTEN*, *BadKitty040270*, or *KittyCatPurrs68*. As she puts it: 'Just as we dress, put on make-up, or move in certain ways to display an attractive image of

¹ As Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008: 252) explains: '(...) an authentic identity does not depend on the correspondence between the gender and sexual orientation of online and offline people, but on the authenticating processes that take place in interaction.'

our bodily selves, participants choose screen names to create an “appearance” that will attract other participants to chat with them’ (2008: 257).

This study demonstrates that in CMC, where there are no pre-existent bodies on which the identities might be constructed, they are created, co-constructed, and negotiated between the participants. The first steps in this process are the choice of the room (typically in terms of age and sexual orientation²) and the creation of a username; these are both performative acts, because these are the ways in which participants recognise each other as members of gender and sexual categories (Del-Teso-Craviotto 2008: 266-267).

Stommel (2007: 144-145) conceptualises usernames as so-called ‘emblems’.³ An emblem is any perceivable sign or thing that somebody reads as indicating identity or, in other words, as images of personhood. If an emblem is widely recognisable, i.e. many people attach the same social meaning to it, it becomes an enregistered emblem – in contrast to situational emblems that emerge and disappear during the course of interaction. Enregistered emblems convey stereotypical images of persons (such as female/male, upper-class, lawyer) through which individuals can be allocated enregistered identities. While the emergent emblems are bound with a particular text, stereotypes circulate in a decontextualised form and shift from one text to another. Their meaning might be modified or altered by the specific context in which they appear.

Usernames can be considered enregistered emblems. They are selected before any interaction takes place; they are fixed and all future interlocutors will normally refer to them. They automatically appear with every post to indicate who wrote it—thus they do not appear and disappear or change depending on the text.

Referring to the example of one German forum for people suffering from eating disorders, Stommel (2007) demonstrates how usernames that can be read as emblems of stereotypical femininities⁴ gain an additional element of meaning as indices of anorectic and bulimic identities in this specific environment.⁵ For example, there is a group of usernames that refer to nature—to flora and fauna, as well as to meteorology and astrology, e.g. *marienblume* (German ‘daisy’), *Snjorblum* (Icelandic ‘snow flower’), *cielo* (Italian/Spanish ‘sky’/‘heaven’), **Schneeflocke** (German ‘snow flake’), *Lluvia* (Spanish ‘rain’), *Schattenvoegelchen* (German ‘small shadow bird’). In European cultures there is a shared idea of associating nature with femininity, which is expressed, for example, in the concept of ‘mother nature’. In addition, the objects referred to on this forum are small and light; this can

² As observed by Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008: 254) these are the most frequently used criteria to divide dating chat rooms (e.g. ‘Bisexuals’, ‘Thirties Love’, ‘Gay 40s’), although occasionally religion and ethnicity are also important (e.g. ‘Jewish Singles’, ‘Asian Singles’).

³ Based on Agha (2007).

⁴ On this forum approximately 97% of participants were female, which is in line with results of studies of the prevalence of eating disorders that have found that females account for approximately 92% of the total number of anorectics and approximately 85% of all bulimics (Stommel 2007: 146-147).

⁵ The ways in which the reading of usernames is modified by the context of usage can also be observed in identities displayed in Del-Teso-Craviotto’s study. First, by the general character of communication in dating chat rooms: where people meet to flirt with each other and possibly to look for romantic partners, usernames will be read through the lens of sexual attraction. And, in addition, locally, depending on specific room—as Del-Teso-Craviotto explains: ‘If bianca66 interacts in ‘Amor’, she will be presenting a female, heterosexual identity. However, if she interacts in ‘Lesbianas’ she will be presenting a female, homosexual identity.’ (2008: 260)

be related to the anorectic and bulimic ideal of thinness and weightlessness, which is often a goal and measure of success for the sufferers.

Another observable group of usernames are references to cartoon and play figures, e.g. *Dorie* (a cartoon figure) or *lillifee79* ('Lillifee', a play figure), that can also be related to both feminine and anorectic identities. Women have often been portrayed as childish, meaning that they are sweet and cute, as well as immature and infantile; linguistically this is expressed, for example, in the fact that women are more often addressed as girls than are men as boys. The wish not to be mature is also characteristic of eating disorders: the attempt to 'regain' control over the changing body may express itself as an attempt to diminish the body.

A different concept of femininity evokes references to figures that are associated with power, high status, and achievements, and bring to mind images of noble, gracious, and intelligent persons, e.g. *Freya*, *hypathia*, *Kassiopaiah*, *Anthea*, *Salome*, *Aletheia*. The modified reading of these references might be as expression of high expectations that the sufferers often have of themselves.

In Androutsopoulos' (2006) study on the multilingual environment of diaspora groups on the web sites based in Germany, he has investigated the role of language choice and code switching in constructing national and ethnic identities. Similarly to Stommel (2007), Androutsopoulos presents usernames as static elements of CMC, in contrast to conversation, and as 'acts of self-presentation that are designed for and displayed to, rather than negotiated with, an audience' (2006: 525). To demonstrate the 'multilayered character of contemporary web environments' Androutsopoulos based his study on 'the distinctions between edited and user sections on the one hand, and "regular" and "emblematic" discourse on the other.' Edited sections are texts produced by editors while user sections are those produced by participants; regular texts are produced on a regular basis while emblematic texts are more stable items of self-presentation. Examples of regular edited texts are various genres of media discourse, such as news or entertainment; regular user texts are interactions between the users; emblematic edited elements are website names and slogans, while usernames—together with user signatures—belong to emblematic user elements (Androutsopoulos 2006: 523-525, 540).

First, usernames are presented as important means of construction of ethnic and national identities by various strategies, such as direct indication, e.g. *Ellinas* 'Greek', *Tehrani*, *PersianLady*, *GreEk_Chika*, *greekgod19*, *sexy_greekgirl*, language choice, i.e. using one's native language, or references to a homeland's culture, such as cuisine, football, mythology, and religion. They may also signify a variety of other identity aspects, such as appearance, gender, character traits, or interests (Androutsopoulos 2006: 525, 539).

In addition, in terms of language diversity, the emblematic elements were found by Androutsopoulos to be more varied compared to conversations, and user texts were more varied than edited texts. Although the majority (roughly two-thirds) of usernames in each forum were in the native language, the language choice was not limited to the native language and German. The second most popular language was English (e.g. *MrCroft*, *caramelgirl*, on the Greek forum); some users combined the home language with English or German (e.g. Persian *Ramin4ever* or Turkish *Zeynepchen*, composed of the first name *Zeynep* 'gem' and the German diminutive suffix) while some participants used other languages, especially

Spanish (e.g. *Chica*, *Cubalita*, from the Greek forum). Other users made references where languages were irrelevant, for example references to brands and names that circulate globally (e.g. *Dolce e Gabanna*, *Kamasutra*, *Don Huan*) (Androutsopoulos 2006: 539). Thus the general picture of national and ethnic identities presented in usernames was found to be more varied than in other types of texts.

Identity on the Russian Internet

As Del-Teso-Craviotto states, identities in CMC are constructed in the context of the ‘intersection among the globalizing nature of the Internet, the influence of national cultures, and the local norms of each individual room’ (2008: 254).

RuNet, a Russian-speaking segment of the Internet, unites users from Russia, former Soviet republics, as well as from the diaspora all over the world—which makes it a culturally complex environment. The introduction of the Internet in Russian society in the 1990s coincided with the transformation of the political system and accompanied its shift from the isolation constructed by Soviet ideology and practice to exposure and confrontation with international and multicultural influences, globalisation, and commercialisation (Schmidt and Teubener 2006: 17).

In a schematic way, there are two main currents in how the interrelationship between the Russian Internet and Russian society is conceptualised, as presented in Schmidt and Teubener (2006: 18-19). On the one hand side, RuNet is perceived as no longer a Western import, but as something genuinely Russian. It is often referred to as *nash RuNet* (‘our RuNet’, which has no equivalent expression in other languages) due to its features of interactivity, connectivity, de-hierarchisation, informal networking, and free information delivery, which are perceived to be in line with characteristics of Russian cultural traditions and the Russian mentality characterised by ‘collaborative ethics and aesthetics, spiritual unity and collectivism, creativity and freedom’. These qualities are said to be more pronounced on RuNet than in other Internet sectors—which is, for example, expressed, in a ‘specific and more flexible understanding of intellectual property rights’ (e.g. richly furnished web libraries) and a ‘strongly expressed tendency towards collectivist behaviour patterns’ (e.g. weblogs largely oriented towards community building). The other approach perceives the Internet as technology of a globally uniform nature and ‘an instrument for work’ rather than ‘a specific milieu or community’. This approach sees the Russian sector of the Internet as ‘on the road towards a complete integration into the global networks’ and as ‘the possibility to escape narrow, national contexts’. Its only particularity is observed in the fact that it has not yet adapted to Western standards, i.e. in persistent problems with its infrastructure and financing, low rates of performance as well as in the general control of media.

The *Posidelki* Forum

The examples of Internet environments presented above demonstrated the sites addressed to specific types of users, or dedicated to a particular subject, or a particular purpose of communication. The forum that I have selected, *Posidelki* (‘Gatherings’), is addressed to

anyone who is able to communicate in Russian, and is not dedicated to any specific topic. My goal, in short, is to see what usernames can tell us about identity in this type of environment.

Forums offer an asynchronous mode of communication, which means that the posts do not have to be responded to immediately; one can access and re-enter a discussion, and contribute at any time.

The *Posidelki* forum is organised into a broad selection of topics that cover virtually anything from ‘how do you have your coffee’ to ‘what is your opinion on the death sentence’. Any registered user can open a new discussion. There are currently 676⁶ registered users, and some 1600 topics. The language of communication is Russian. I have not registered as a user and could only access publicly available data.

Usernames in *Posidelki*

As stated before, according to Del-Teso-Craviotto’s (2008) usernames may stand for participants’ bodies. Because in text-based CMC there are no bodies, and therefore none of the audio-visual cues that are facilitated by bodies in face-to-face interactions, the role of usernames is to substitute for those missing cues that are relevant in specific environments, which in the case of Del-Teso-Craviotto’s study was first of all gender.

In *Posidelki* we can observe some gender-constructing strategies similar to those mentioned in Del-Teso-Craviotto’s (2008: 258) work. One of these is by means of grammatical gender, which might constitute the main indicator of gender identity—or which might also be combined with associations related to semantics. The examples are: ethnonyms, such as *Aziatka* ‘an Asian’ (f) or *tatar* (m), some usernames derived from adjectives or adjectival nouns, e.g. *molod* ‘young’ (m), *Строптив@я* [stroptivaia] ‘obstinate’ (f), *святой* [sviatoi] ‘saint’ (m), *Сероглазая* [seroglazaia] ‘grey-eyed’ (f), *рыжая* [ryzhaia] ‘redhead, ginger’ (f), and nouns referring to persons: *Гость* [gost’] ‘guest’ (m), *Форумчиха* [forumchikha] ‘forumer’ (f), *ветеран* [veteran] (m).

Other explicit indications of gender identity in *Posidelki* include: denotations with no equivalents for the opposite gender, e.g. *Alpha_Dog*, personal nouns that are different for males and females, e.g. *misterX*, *Lord Fell*, *GiRl*, *NastyGirl*, *pandagirl*, *KilerLedy2008*, *Lady*, *Дамочка* [damochka] ‘little lady’, and *superledi* ‘super lady’, as well as conventional names.

However, there are no references to the age/sex/location schema. There are a number of usernames containing numbers that might suggest age (e.g. *Anny26*, *alex25*), year of birth (e.g. *adro77*, *OLICS68*, *integral66*), or date of birth (e.g. *Ulyana13111975* (13/11/1975), *galina5161* (05/01/1961), *Kali13666* (13/06/1966))—but not all of them indicate gender, and even those that contain gender-indicative names may not have been intended primarily to represent gender identity.

Some usernames might indicate gender indirectly, by reference to stereotypically masculine or feminine characteristics. Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008: 258) has observed references to body parts, animal bodies, and other objects commonly associated with the bodily attributes of femininity and masculinity.

⁶ On 23 December 2014.

In *Posidelki* references to body parts are very few: *Сероглазая* [seroglazaia] ‘grey-eyed’ and *рыжая* [ryzhaia] ‘redhead, ginger’. Other examples of usernames that may be considered as evoking body images are: *Krasa* ‘beauty’, *molod* ‘young’, *Старушка_Бетти* [starushka Betty] ‘the elderly/granny Betty’, *Krasavchik* ‘little handsome; a dandy’. Also, as in Del-Teso-Craviotto’s findings, there are a number of references to cats and kittens, a stereotypical reading of which will be that they express female identities, possibly as an attractive, sensual or ‘cute’ images of femininity: *кошка* [koshka] ‘cat, pussycat’ (in Russian the generic name for a cat is grammatically feminine), *Kummu* [kitti] ‘kitty’, *Kisa* ‘kitty, pussycat’, *kisaб* ‘kittyб, pussycatб’, *Nekotenok* ‘Non-kitten’, and *kiska25627* ‘kitty25627, kitten25627’. Other references to animals are not frequent, and include: *енот* [enot] ‘raccoon’, *Шмель* [shmel’] ‘Bumblebee’, *клоп-вонючка* [klop-voniuchka] ‘stinky bedbug’ (grammatically masculine), *СаМоЧКА_СоБаЧКИ* [samochka sobachki] ‘(little) dog’s (little) female’ (possibly a euphemism for ‘bitch’) and *Старая Собака* [staraia sobaka] ‘old dog’ (grammatically feminine), and *pandagirl*. However, whether or not these carry associations with sexual attractiveness is questionable, especially considering that some of them are of a rather derogatory character.

Usernames referring to elements of attire, although not referring to the body as such, may also associate with appearance, e.g. *Muftocka* ‘little muff, hand-warmer’ and *Бусинка* [businka] ‘little bead’, which connote female identities. Also references to ‘angels’: *~Angel-*, *Ангел* [angel] ‘angel’ as well as *White AngeL* and *~Sweet Angel~* may suggest persons of a pleasant appearance. ‘Angel’ might be used as a term of address for a nice, kind, but also attractive-looking person and will probably be associated with a female rather than a male, although in Russian ‘angel’ is grammatically masculine.

Other types of usernames that might stereotypically be perceived as expressing female identity are references to food. The traditional division of labour between the sexes ‘requires women to feed others and not the self’ (Stommel 2007: 143). *Ватрушка* [vatrushka] ‘a pie with soft cheese’ and *kulebyaka* ‘a pie with a savoury stuffing’—traditional Russian dishes—may be seen as referring to a traditional, domestic model of the female role as a feeding and nurturing person. On the other hand, females that are perceived as attractive are also often referred to by food-related terminology, such as tasty, yummy, sweet, etc.: *Джуси Фрукта* [juicy fruitka] ‘little/female juicy fruit’ (suffix *-ka* may indicate both diminutive as well as feminine forms), *малиновый десерт* [malinovyi desert] ‘raspberry dessert’, and *Чупа-Чупс* may be considered as constructing this type of image.

Similarly to what Stommel (2007: 151-153) has observed, in *Posidelki* the natural world seems to be a popular source for usernames, and also mostly connote feminine identities, e.g. *Kalendula* ‘calendula’, *Незабудка* [nezabudka] ‘forget-me-not’, *Мальва* [mal’va] ‘mallow’, *tak* ‘poppy’, *вишенка* [vishenka] ‘little cherry’, *Рябинка* [riabinka] ‘little rowan(berry)’, *Ромашика* [romashka] ‘chamomile’, *alaya_malva* ‘scarlet mallow’, *Belka2010* ‘Squirrel2010’, *Стрекоза* [strekoza] ‘dragonfly’, *Люттик* [liutik] ‘buttercup flower’, *kalibri* ‘hummingbird’, *Kalibri_N*, *cucushonok* ‘cuckoo chick’, *Svetliyachok* ‘little firefly’, *Raduga* ‘rainbow’, and *Ladybird*. In addition, the majority of these words are also grammatically feminine. Although they also denote small or light objects, there is no reason to interpret them through the lens of eating disorders—even though in some cases this might in fact be the case.

The concept of ‘childish femininity’, as observed by Stommel (2007: 155), can also be noticed in *Posidelki*. There are a number of usernames that include popular terms of endearment (*Kisa* ‘kitty, pussycat’, *kisa6* ‘kitty6, pussycat6’, *kiska25627* ‘kitty25627, kitten25627’, *Малышка* [malyshka] ‘baby (girl)’, *РЫБКА* [rybka] ‘little fish’, *Sweetie* ‘sweetie’, *Pupsik* ‘little doll, cutie’, *Солнышко* [solnyfko] ‘little sun’, *лапочка* [lapochka], and *лапочка15* [lapochka15] ‘sweetie, honey’), fairy-tale characters: (*Дюймовочка* [diuimovochka] ‘Thumbelina’, *Лиса алиса* [lisa Alisa] ‘Alisa the Fox’) as well as a considerable number of usernames in the form of diminutive variants of conventional names, such as: *аленушка* [alenushka], *Даночка*, *Олесенька* [olesen’ka], *Юленька* [iulen’ka], *Юлечка* [iulechka], which will connote female rather than male identities—although some of them may be derived from both male and female names, e.g. *сашулька* [sashul’ka] and *Санечка* [sanechka] can originate from either Aleksandr or Aleksandra.

Another way of gender-typing in usernames is by referring to famous figures. These might be authentic persons or invented characters. The names that designate individuals who are widely known will invoke a specific gender as well as other characteristics associated with these figures that may or may not include physical appearance, e.g. *Тарантино* ‘Tarantino’, *kaligyla*, *Osiris*, *ЭркюльПуаро* ‘Hercule Poirot’, and *СанчоПансо* ‘Sancho Panza’ connote masculine identities, while *Пандора* ‘Pandora’, *ariadna*, *Audrey Tautou*, and *Shakira* connote female identities.

Referents from more specialised subcultures, such as computer games (*Atagachi* ‘Tagachi’, *Vuky* ‘Wookie’, *RiptoR*) and manga and anime characters (*Katashi*, *Inyasha*, *Харуко* [kharuko], *харука* [kharuka]), familiar amongst narrower groups of people, might not bring immediate gendered associations; for example, names of manga and anime characters are not obviously gendered for those who do not speak Japanese or who are not familiar with manga and anime series.

Several usernames in *Posidelki* do not seem to represent bodies. Rather, they seem to construct psychological representations by more or less direct references to personality, states of mind, feelings, emotions, etc. A group of these seem to form another model of female identity that can be described as ‘emotional femininity’. A common cultural stereotype links femininity with emotions, in opposition to masculinity which is associated with reason. One side of this concept is the warm, comforting, caring, and loving ideal of femininity, whose reflection we may find in *~Lovely_Love~*, *lovestori*, *smile1*, *SMILE*, *LovingHeart*, *Поцелуйка* [potseluika] (from *поцеловать* – ‘to kiss’ or *поцелуй* – ‘a kiss’) ‘the kissing/kissable one’. In contrast to this, feminine emotionality is also conceived as irrational, nonsensical, and quarrelsome. *Шалена* [shalena] ‘crazy’, *Меланхолия* [melankholia] ‘melancholy’, *Лавина эмоций* [lavina emotsii] ‘avalanche of emotions’, *Странная* [strannaia] ‘strange, weird’, *Строптив@я* [stroptivaia] ‘obstinate’, *prichuda* ‘whim; freak’, *Plaksa* ‘crybaby’, *~Грубая_Нежность~* [grubaia nezhnost’] ‘rough tenderness’, and *царапка* [tsarapka] (from *царапать* – ‘to scratch’) ‘the scratching/scratchy one’, might serve as examples.

Other types of usernames that do not necessarily evoke images of bodies are references to seemingly more external aspects of existence: activities, roles, status, etc. Some of these evoke traditional gender roles (such as *Лилия мама* [lilia mama], *Mère Susie* ‘Mother Susie’, *Корсар10000* [korsar] ‘corsair’, *Создатель Миров* [sozdatel’ mirov]

‘creator of worlds’, *ветеран* [veteran], *Executioner*, *Хитер* [khiter] ‘hitter’, *Lady*, *Дамочка* [damochka] ‘little lady’, some are not associated ideologically with any specific gender: *Гость* [gost] ‘guest’, *Форумчиха* [forumchikha] ‘forumer’, *LariSKA gitaristka* ‘Lariska the guitarist’, *Царица Ирина* [tsaritsa irina] ‘Empress Irene’, *@RTi\$T*—while other contrast stereotypically associated roles: *Уличная Хулиганка* [ulichnaia khuliganka] ‘street hooligan (f)’. In fact, many of these would perhaps be better read metaphorically as mental states rather than as references to actual activities, such as: *Пилигрим* [piligrim] ‘pilgrim’, *Скиталец* [skitalets] ‘wanderer’, or *lunatic* ‘sleepwalker’.

Some usernames refer to what might be described as ‘cultural prototypes’ – ready-made personal models that circulate in the social space: *Glamik* ‘little glamour’ (referring to a specific style), *Chainik* ‘kettle; dummy’, *Sterv@* ‘bitch’, *Кралья* [kralia] ‘a darling, a doll, a bird’, *Alpha_Dog*, *JoeJock2007*, and *Djok*. They are often used with derogatory or humorous overtones and are also associated with specific genders.

One group of usernames refers to various phenomena from everyday life (*Melodia* ‘melody’, *Секунда* [sekunda] ‘a second’, *VILKA* ‘fork’, *Анализ* [analiz] ‘analysis’, *Пирамидка* [piramidka] ‘small/little pyramid’, *Wilо4ka* [vilochka] ‘little fork’) that in general evoke images based on the qualities associated with these objects. They might be interpreted as standing for various types of characteristics, for example, *kislota* ‘acid’ may evoke a drug user. Some of these usernames might be perceived as gender-typing, e.g. *шлямбур* [shliambur] (an element of climbing equipment) might be associated with an activity that requires physical strength, and is also grammatically masculine. But often they do not seem to carry any stereotypical images and there is no thematic lens on this forum through which they might be interpreted.

Many of the usernames in this group are derived from English (over a hundred in total are derived from English), e.g. *sunday*, *secret555*, *SKI*, *stop*, *Air*, *Energy+*, *Hazelnut*, *simple-words*, *you6907*, *needle*, *Fluid*, *Bag*, *Venom*, *Smiling Spectre*, *scarsopen*, *Eagle*, *joystik19*, *Silk*, †*DarkNess*†, ♪*Music baby*♪, *easyeas*, *Happy Free Bird*, *MyDoom*, *Standart*, *mirror* ‘mirror’, *eNENeRGY*, *manki* ‘monkey’, *-inception*, *newalias*, *Noname*, *antiMiracle*, *sherrymark728*. This makes English the second most common language, which is consistent with Androutsopoulos’ findings (2006). There are also hybrid formations, such as *Glamik* (glamour + -ik) ‘little glamour’, *bodiarik* ‘little body art’ (body + art + -ik), or *Джусу Фрутка* [juicy fruitka] ‘little/female juicy fruit’ (juicy fruit + -ka). These usernames most likely reflect the general influence of English in CMC, including Russian CMC.

Other languages used in *Posidelki* are much less frequent and include: French (*Le Soleil* ‘The Sun’, *Mère Susie* ‘mother Susie’), Italian (*cattiva* ‘bad’), Spanish (*Amigo* ‘friend’), and Ukrainian *Шалена* [Shalena] ‘crazy’. These usernames may perhaps indicate nationality (especially the Ukrainian username) or current place of living in the case of diaspora members. There are also usernames that came from Japanese (*Hitsugi*, *Katashi*, *Харуко* [kharuko], *харука* [kharuka], *Самото* [samoto], *Yonaki*) that may illustrate an interest in Japanese contemporary culture, notably manga and anime series. Some usernames may indicate Russian speakers of non-Russian ethnicity, for example from former Soviet republics (*amira*, *Farida*, *faruh*, *mahmud*, *maksat*, *Nurbek*). These usernames do suggest specific ethnicity/nationality but we do not know whether or not this was a deliberate strategy of self-presentation to specifically manifest ethnic identities. Other usernames that suggest

nationality, ethnicity, or place of living are direct references to places, nationalities or ethnicity (*Lemberg*, *Sakartvelo* ‘Georgia’, *tatar*, *Aziatka* ‘Asian’). A number of usernames refer to internationally recognised brands that are not associated with any specific culture or language, e.g. *Chanel*, *MARTINI*, *Chupa-Chups*, *Activia* (as in Androutsopoulos 2006: 539). Specific references to Russian culture are not frequent and include references to personages from literature (*AnnaKarenina*, *Ассоль* [assol’]) and cinema (*Фрося Бурлакова* [frosia burlakova]), Russian music bands (*AKADO*, *Психея* [psikheya]), and traditional dishes (*Ватрушка* [vatrushka] (a kind of pie), *kulebyaka* (a kind of pie)).

Finally, there is a group of semantically and gender-ambiguous usernames that seem like novel formations whose meaning is only known to their authors, e.g. *groes77*, *BARS5911*, *awtoyscom*, *aeda*, *ulireuu*, *turpb*, *suc95*, *stra111*.

Conclusions

The present study has confirmed that usernames serve to construct a first impression that is similar to the image we get of people when we first meet them. This might be performed by the construction of body images but also of psychological portraits, as well as by references to other activities, such as interests.

As stereotyped tags that are modified by the context of their appearance, in a non-themed environment, where the factor of meaning modification is weak, usernames will probably be read as decontextualised representations of stereotypical identities. On the forum analysed in this study, there seems to be no central type or concept of identity that is performed through usernames. Usernames are also varied thematically: inspired by religion, history, mythology, literature, and popular culture, and include references to traditional and modern values in both Russian and international cultural phenomena.

Gender seems to be an important aspect of the identity to present, although with gendered nouns and adjectives it is much more difficult to avoid gender-typing usernames in Russian, whereas usernames in English are more often gender-ambiguous. The concepts of femininities and masculinities in *Posidelki*, although they partly overlap, seem more varied than those reported by Stommel (2007) or Del-Teso-Craviotto (2008). A number of references to stereotypical models of gender identities can be observed: some of these form groups of more or less linked patterns, but there are also usernames that do not evoke unambiguous associations.

In line with Androutsopoulos’ (2006) findings, in *Posidelki*—where Russian is the only language of communication—the language diversity in usernames is much greater than in conversations, especially due to derivations from English.

In general, usernames can be categorised in many ways and several usernames will fit various categories. What is important to note is that the interpretations may not always match the intentions of the author; but this is in the interactional nature of identity – it is constantly negotiated between the interlocutors. As Danet *et al.* (1997) put it: ‘There is a certain amount of risk in the interpretations of the nicks we develop (...). However, we are actually in the same position as the players themselves, who must develop their own interpretations of the textual mask presented by any given player.’

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