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Naming, Identity, and Social Positioning in Teenagers' Everyday Mobile Phone Interaction

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This article analyzes how a small group of Swedish teenagers handle onomastic choices of self- and other-referencing as part of their everyday mobile phone interaction. It further discusses how the teenagers explained their views regarding online names during interviews. The data are analyzed qualitatively using theories of identity and social positioning. Results show considerable differences between onomastic strategies used for self- and other-referencing. Self-referencing names were often practical, coherent, and authentic to the offline self, while other-referencing names were more flexible, creative, and socially positioned. However, the teenagers also displayed varying individual onomastic strategies and different folk-onomastic views on the function of usernames.

KEYWORDS usernames, display names, online naming, identity, social positioning, folk-onomastics.

Introduction

Young people today interact with their peers not only face to face but also through a range of digital technologies including mobile phones with functions such as embedded instant messaging and social media applications. Many of these technologies require registration of a username (onomastic self-referencing). In some cases, technologies further enable users to adapt how other interactants' identities are displayed (other-referencing). Digital interaction therefore permits a range of onomastic choices. In Sweden, nearly all teenagers (98%) own a mobile phone and use it daily to engage in digital activities, primarily interaction with peers (Swedish Media Council 2015). Despite this high usage, naming practices have not been studied. This pilot study aims to start exploring the research gap. The article discusses how choices of self- and other-referencing in

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mobile phone interactions are handled by a small group of Swedish teenagers with a focus on the following questions: What kind of self-referencing usernames and other-referencing display names are constructed for daily mobile phone interaction? What kind of identities and social positionings are constructed through onomastic choices? How are usernames and display names handled and viewed by teenagers themselves?

Identity in online interaction

Digital technologies provide opportunities for instant online interaction that ignore physical distance as well as encourage highly alert focusing and engagement in social relations through fast turn-taking (Cummings, Lee, and Kraut 2006). These technologies also provide a richness of discursive resources and communication practices that encourage linguistic and multimodal creativity (Barton and Lee 2013) and can be used for identity creation. In fact, research on online interaction has identified "self-centredness", i.e. people paying constant attention to how they present themselves, as a key factor of influence (Barton and Lee 2013). The general absence of physical bodies in online spaces enables people to actively reconstruct, perform, and negotiate a new kind of online body and self-authored identity markers (Thomas 2007). This relatively high degree of freedom in identity creation raises questions of multiplicity versus unity, as well as anonymity versus publicity in online identity construction (see also Gatson 2011).

Online identities, like offline identities, are not chosen entirely freely but rather, are constructed in relation to a certain community of others (Barton and Lee 2013). Early research hypothesized that online agency would erase existing offline hierarchies, but this is not supported by current research (Page 2016). Instead, it seems that online interaction is often embedded in offline encounters, spaces, and relations in a way that blurs the simplistic binary of online/offline (Page 2016). As Lloyd and Gillard (2010, 13) have pointed out in their study of personalized use of mobile phones, people write, decorate, and copy content in order "to give depth to their daily [offline] experience, and to tell others what their [online] presence means", which entails people unconsciously using discursive means to position the self (Davies and Harré [1990] 2001) in a social space. In so doing, people must also unconsciously consider questions about the relationship between "self" and "others", such as similarity versus difference, realness versus fakeness, and power versus disempowerment (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). To conclude, online identity construction may occur through multiple mediums and on multiple levels (Gatson 2011), through "writing oneself into being" (Barton and Lee 2013, 84), through multimodal practices (Lloyd and Gillard 2010) – and through onomastic choices.

Online naming practices

Online usernames enable people to enter a conversation online, to be recognized as unique individuals, and to present themselves to the community. Furthermore, usernames are often the primary way of recognizing individuals in the flow of interaction (Hagström 2012) and therefore substitute physical bodies in the creation of first impressions (Heisler and Crabill 2006). There has been a growing scientific interest in online naming practices in recent years, focusing primarily on chatroom usernames (see Aleksiejuk 2016 for a recent overview). Email usernames have also been studied to some

extent (Heisler and Crabill 2006), while usernames in mobile phone interactions seem to be previously unexplored.

Although the choice of a username is not entirely unconstrained – regulations may exist regarding uniqueness, length, symbols, offensive words, etc. (Aleksiejuk 2016) – the ability to consciously choose onomastic self-representation enables people to engage actively in constructing an online identity. A number of studies have argued that usernames indicate how individuals want to present themselves in a particular setting, by emphasizing those aspects of identity that are most relevant in that context (cf. Bughesiu 2012). Usernames may be used to express personality and personal interests (Gatson 2011; Tingstad 2003), age (Bechar-Israeli 1995; Lytra 2003), gender, sexuality, and physical appearance (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes 2004), ethnicity (Tynes, Reynolds, and Greenfield 2004), or cultural and religious orientations (Hassa 2012). A few studies have noted connections between chat forum themes and semantic properties of usernames that contribute to strengthening group identity – and clearly mark ingroup/outgroup boundaries (Hagström 2012; Stommel 2008). The written form of communication seemingly emphasizes spelling and other visual aspects of names and encourages onomastic creativity and playfulness (Aarsand 2008; Bechar-Israeli 1995). Choosing a creative username may make it easier for interactants to assume a certain "persona" within a virtual game (Hagström 2012) but may also ensure anonymity through deliberate masking (Gatson 2011). Using the official offline name as a username may signal frame-shifting from an online to an offline setting (Jacobson 1996), but may also be perceived as boring (Hämäläinen 2013; Lindholm 2013). Studies of teenagers' use of chatroom usernames point to the particular importance of names displaying a "cool" image (Gatson 2011; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes 2004; Tingstad 2003). Quist (2012, 347–355) describes how a group of Danish teenagers brainstorm usernames that strike a balance between "cool and crazy". This example illustrates how onomastic choices can be used for social positioning of self vis-à-vis others within a social space, although this perspective on online naming is scarcely explored in existing research. Neither have previous studies considered the role of power in online naming practices.

Data description

In this pilot study, a small group of four Swedish teenagers took screenshots of all their written mobile phone interactions during two days in 2016, and they also participated in individual in-depth interviews. The teenagers (two girls and two boys) were 14 years old at the time of the study and attended the same school in a small provincial town in western Sweden. They were told that the study would analyze "details of language use in mobile phone interaction", but naming strategies were not emphasized until the interviews in order to avoid bias. As the teenagers are underage, their parents also consented to the study. During the period of data collection the four teenagers mainly used technologies such as Embedded Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM), Snapchat, Facebook, YouTube channel, and KiK. The collected strings of interaction were searched for indications of names, including both self-referencing usernames and other-referencing display names (used by the four teenagers to adapt how their peers' identities were displayed in mobile phone interaction), with the latter visible only to the name-giving teenager. To protect the teenagers' identities, online names containing offline personal names or

other identifying clues have been anonymized so as to indicate the structure of name elements without revealing the teenagers' identity.

The individual reflective interviews were conducted in a familiar environment on school premises and encouraged the teenagers to, *inter alia*, describe their use, experiences, and attitudes to names in online interaction. Recordings were roughly transcribed and searched for recurring themes and similarities as well as dissimilarities across participants. The data were interpreted using theoretical perspectives from identity theory and social positioning (as described in Sections 2 and 3), as well as folk-onomastics (Ainiala 2015). For this article, interview extracts have been translated into English.

The data collection resulted in a total of 14 self-referencing usernames, 35 other-referencing display names, and a number of reflective narratives. As the data were limited in scope, no generalizations can be made. However, the data do, to some extent, provide in-depth knowledge about individual naming strategies, attitudes, and use of names across contexts and time. This permits analysis of the role of online naming in individuals' everyday construction of identity and social positioning.

Teenage use of self-referencing usernames

Name analysis

Two onomastic strategies appear among the self-referencing usernames in this group of teenagers. The first strategy is the most common: basing the username on the offline first name (FN) followed by the offline last name (LN). Either (or both) of the offline names may appear abbreviated. Invented examples of this strategy corresponding to usernames in the data are *MariaAndersson* and *MarAnd*, corresponding to an offline FN *Maria* and an offline LN *Andersson*. Abbreviations were often explained by the teenagers as originally created by the school as default institutional identifiers. One of the boys justified his continued use of this abbreviation because it "sounds cool". He thereby indicates that the primary motivation is not the shortening strategy itself (cf. Aleksiejuk 2016) but instead, creating a certain stylistic effect that can be used for social positioning.

The second onomastic strategy involves using the offline FN *or* LN in combination with a personalized element. This strategy enables the username to function simultaneously as a way to single out the individual (cf. Hämäläinen 2013) and to emphasize a certain offline identity (cf. Bughesiu 2012). One of the girls, who describes herself as a "horse-[loving]-girl", has created the username *FIRST NAME_ NAME OF HORSE*. One of the boys, who is highly interested in technology and science, has included what he describes as his "lucky number" as part of a username similar to *Luc29* (with an abbreviation of FN *Lucas*) (cf. Bughesiu 2012, 11). This illustrates how a personalized name element conveying a profound meaning for the bearer may seem quite formal to others. Another boy has created a username containing his offline LN followed by three emoticons: a diamond, a peace sign, and a flame. He describes this creation not as mere decoration but rather, as meaningful uses of symbols. According to him, the diamond should be interpreted as a symbol of "being nice and valuing stuff" and the flame as an ambiguous symbol of both "being cool" and "being good-looking/hot". (The peace sign is unfortunately not commented on in the interview.) Teenagers' perceived importance of "cool" usernames has been noted in several previous studies (Gatson 2011; Quist 2012;

Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes 2004; Tingstad 2003). However, such usernames do not only indicate teenage values: they also can be viewed as resources for establishing a high-status position within the peer group. As Adams (2009) noted regarding nicknames, introducing a new name changes the existing situation and power relations. Choosing a "cool" username may therefore indicate a claim for a social position, which may or may not be accepted by peers, but nonetheless contributes to the negotiation of social relations.

A third strategy, only used by one teenager, involves coining a completely new self-referencing username. In this case, the name was originally created for a gaming setting where innovative names are common and used to indicate a character's persona (Hagström 2012).

Views, usage, and change

During interviews, it became clear that the teenagers hold different and partly contradictory folk-onomastic views on what the main function of a username is and what constitutes "a good username" (cf. Hämäläinen 2013). Their views can be described along a continuum from a creative to a pragmatic position. One boy explains: "My username says something about how I think about myself and such … It is like a short description of who you are." For this teenager, the username functions as a resource for creativity and self-authored identity creation (cf. Thomas 2007). Although he also adds that he is aware his peers may choose to adapt how his username is displayed on their phones, he seems to find it important to express himself through the choice of username. He uses several different usernames for separate online contexts, which enables him to emphasize different parts of his identity depending on the situation and engage in a constant recreation of the self (cf. Barton and Lee 2013). One of his usernames was described in this way during the interview: "It is so cool. It doesn't mean anything but it is innovative and creative and therefore suitable as a username."

The second boy expresses a somewhat similar view in that the self-referencing username should be "something that you can connect yourself to". However, he also explains that for him, his striving for creativity and expressive meaning was mediated by the demand for a unique username within a particular context: "At first, I came up with a lot of different things, but then it was only this that was available. So, I have used it ever since." This is a description of his very first creation of an online username, and although later he could have chosen to create other more innovative usernames for other online settings, he decided to stick to the name. Should it not be available, he explains, then he simply switches the position of the different name elements, doubles an element, or adds an underscore in order to achieve the required differentiation (cf. Hämäläinen 2013). He argues that "everything gets easier this way" and implies a more pragmatic view of the self-referencing username. In using the same (or similar) self-referencing name in all online settings, he enables the creation of a coherent online identity that reaches across several domains. This, to some extent, resembles the use of offline personal names.

One of the girls expresses a similar pragmatic view of the self-referencing username, emphasizing that it must be long-lasting. She currently prefers to use a rather formal username that is closely linked to her offline personal name, whereas she previously used a great variety of more personalized names. One of these is still in use, since she

does not want to lose the achieved "score" within the particular social media setting. However, she explains that she feels embarrassed to give it to new peers:

> Well because it is just so, really, it sounds like I am 10–11 years old, you know. But a lot of my friends have names like something with the name of their cat or a celebrity … A lot of my emails, I have had a lot that I forgot the passwords for, [usernames] such as 'FN is the best', 'FN is awesome', 'Cool FN', and so on, a lot of nerdy names. They are really nerdy. So now I only use FN + LN, in case I have regrets in the future. Which I didn't think about when I was 10 years old and first got into Snapchat.

For this teenage girl, an expressive or self-boosting username is perceived as "nerdy" and has connotations of an earlier childish period of life. In contrast, she perceives a more formal username to be long-lasting and "safer". It seems that, for her, the switch to a more public way of self-referencing is part of growing up and switching to a more adult frame of communication.

The second girl in this study expresses a different view altogether. She finds it difficult to engage with or motivate the choice of her own self-referencing username (which consists of FN + LN) at all. She simply states: "Well, it is just that this is my name." When refusing to reflect on her own username, she considers it a self-evident label that needs no comment. Unlike the other teenagers, she seems to find it unimaginable to have chosen any other kind of username for herself than this very formal one. Thus, she creates an inseparable merging between online and offline identity (cf. Page 2016). She also seems to refuse to use the username as a resource for creativity or engage in her own identity creation. This view is very far removed from that expressed by the first boy above.

Teenage use of other-referencing display names

Name analysis

The other-referencing display names, used by the four teenagers to display their peers' identities, are constructed in more varying ways. These names also seem to be more informal, relational, and imbued with meaning. The onomastic strategies of using offline FN + LN or FN + personalized element as the basis for the online name apply here as well. However, further strategies are also common. The other-referencing display name may be based on an offline byname or hypocoristic form (such as *Kalle* for *Karl*), a social categorization (such as *Best friend*), or another descriptive noun phrase (such as *My hero*). Using offline bynames seems to indicate a close relationship to the named peer, but the exact nature of their relationship is not specified. The use of social categorizations, on the other hand, describe the exact relationship between name-giver and named peer. Use of other noun phrases in the name formation seems to emphasize a specific characteristic of the given peer's personality (as perceived by the teenager). For example, the teenage girl who constructed the other-referencing display name *The world's best BYNAME* for one of her male friends explained the name thus: "Well, he is just so great. He kind of makes everyone happy and therefore he is the world's best."

In addition, several of the other-referencing names contain emoticons alongside the elements mentioned above. Emoticons seem to be particularly common in names based on offline personal names and mediating the formality of such a display name. The most commonly added emoticon is a red heart, sometimes with an arrow, sometimes doubled.

This seems to be used as an affective marker, often referring to a close friend of the same sex, but avoided for close friends of the opposite sex. One of the boys describes how he uses pictorial symbols in order to emphasize how he views the identity of his peers. For example, he added a monkey to the display name of a friend who "jokes around a lot". In other cases, emoticons seem to be used more as stylistic markers. One girl often uses an infinity symbol. Another girl often uses zodiac signs. The use of recurring symbols can create connections between the display names of several peers, indicating common group affiliations. However, the use of symbols also can be a way to emphasize certain individuals over others in the peer group and create a hierarchy. One of the girls in the study describes how she has avoided using them "so people would not start to worry if I had a heart on that one and not on another one, so they would get sad". According to Gustafsson (2016, 47), offline bynames can be seen as statements of a certain relationship between the naming and the named persons. A similar conclusion seems to hold for other-referencing display names, even if these are generally only visible to the name-giver and cannot be contested by the named peer.

Views, usage, and change

The folk-onomastic views on other-referencing display names, as expressed by the teenagers in the interviews, primarily emphasize a creative function. One of the girls explained it this way: "It is kind of more fun to rename your friends [than yourself]." However, not all peers are renamed in this manner. It often seems to be the case that only peers who the teenagers feel "particularly close to" are given adapted display names in the flow of interaction. Conversely, a formal (*not* adapted) other-referencing display name may indicate distance. One teenage girl explains that using the full offline personal name as display name is, for her, a way to avoid emphasizing the relationship to "someone you do not like". As previously noted by Harré (1980), the choice *not* to use bynames for a peer can also be an act of power and contribute to group exclusion. However, use of offline names also can be a practical strategy "so you find people quickly", as explained by one of the boys, who avoids adapting other-referencing display names altogether.

In contrast to self-referencing usernames, the teenagers in this study report that they change the display names of their peers on a regular basis. One of the girls explains: "You know, you get tired and then you can have different symbols for best friends that you might want to change." Tingstad (2003, 218) interprets such regular changes of usernames as a way of elaborating with fluid identities. It also highlights the function of onomastic other-referencing as part of playful linguistic exchange. Furthermore, constant renaming of peers indicates a continuous negotiation and reconstruction of social relations and power hierarchies.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore teenagers' onomastic choices in contexts of everyday mobile phone interactions. Since the data are quite limited, the study does not allow for any generalizations. Nonetheless, the results provide an initial understanding of individual naming practices in a previously unexplored setting. An overall conclusion is that this particular group of teenagers constructed usernames and display names that

often contained offline personal name elements. Using an identity-theoretical perspective, such names lead to highly public onomastic identities (cf. Gatson 2011) and create a close connection between teenagers' online and offline selves (cf. Jacobsson 1996). Since the self-referencing usernames were rarely changed, unity and identity stability across contexts is further enhanced. As a consequence, teenagers generally refrained from using the opportunity to reconstruct a new kind of self-authored identity marker for the online setting as Thomas (2007) suggested often happens elsewhere. It seems that, for this particular group of teenagers using this particular form of interaction, it was often important to create an online onomastic identity that was *coherent* and *authentic to the offline self*. This onomastic strategy was justified in various ways by the teenagers: as simply practical, or as a way of "acting mature", i.e. switching to an adult frame of communication. The latter indicates that identity work can be performed even through seemingly formal onomastic choices.

Not all of the teenagers perceived usernames containing offline personal name elements to be a suitable choice. For one participant, such names were seen as boring (cf. Hämäläinen 2013), which led to a different, more creative and playful onomastic strategy of self-reference. He chose to regularly construct new usernames specifically designed for each online setting, which allowed him to emphasize varying parts of his identity in a highly situated manner (cf. Bughesiu 2012). To the extent that self-referencing usernames in the study contained personalized elements, they often emphasized aspects of personal identity. This result is in line with previous research on online naming practices (Aleksiejuk 2016) and reinforces the general self-centeredness of online interaction (Barton and Lee 2013). However, names were also used to create a certain social "image" or to claim a certain position within the peer group. Such onomastic strategies can be responded to differently by peers (for example, one teenager in this study abandoned a self-referencing username that was not approved by the peer group) and thus to some extent contribute to the continuous negotiation of power and social positions within the peer group (cf. Adams 2009).

Other-referencing display names created by the group of teenagers, in contrast with self-referencing ones, primarily emphasized social identities, relationships, and positioning of others in social space. Friendship and family connections were often signaled in these names, in a way that manifested collective identities of importance to the individual. The mere existence of a personalized other-referencing display name could indicate a privileged in-group position for the named person. Furthermore, other-referencing display names often expressed hierarchies of different kinds, either in the form of lexical elements (*The best*) or in the form of added emoticons (hearts, etc.), showing that not all friends were of equal importance. The continual changes of other-referencing names further indicated that the teenagers continually negotiated peer identities and relations. Through these naming practices, teenagers constructed their own social space within which they alone were in control of the power distribution (cf. Adams 2009). At the same time, the regular changes of other-referencing display names were also connected to a striving for playfulness and creativity. Teenagers thus created online onomastic identities for their peers that could be described as *flexible*, *creative*, and *socially positioned*.

The individual teenagers in the study displayed varying onomastic strategies as well as varying folk-onomastic views on the function of a username. In general, onomastic self-referencing seemed to be perceived as a more serious identity performance closely

connected to the self, while onomastic other-referencing was to a greater extent viewed as part of linguistic playfulness. However, the individual variation highlights the importance of recognizing individual dynamics within online naming practices. Further research with larger sets of data is needed to develop more precise conclusions.

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