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Technologies, Identities, and Expressive Activity

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication technologies both complexify and help to reveal the dynamics of human communicative activity and capacity for identity performance. Addressing current scholarship on second language use and development, this review article examines research on identity in digital settings either as a design element of educational practice or as a function of participation in noninstitutionally located online cultures. We also address new frontiers and communication in the digital wilds, as it were, and here we focus on cultural production in fandom sites and the processes of transcultural authoring and community building visible in these settings.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies have complex effects on the processes and entities that they mediate. Sociological analyses have documented that the Internet has qualitatively transformed everyday communication and information practices in professional, educational, recreational, and interpersonal realms (e.g., Castells, 1996, 1997). Social media networks enable historically stable as well as emergent and hybrid forms of communicative practice to propagate. The Internet as an ecology of multilingual environments, sometimes described by the term *linguistic superdiversity* (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), has received significant attention in part because it constitutes a multiplicity of language contact zones that is unprecedented in human history (Danet & Herring, 2007; Paolillo, 2007). Early Internet communication tools, accompanied more recently by social media, have facilitated an enormous increase in the volume of communication. Concurrently, many-to-many communication environments have continued to appear and often to flourish; examples include online interest groups, media sharing sites, wikis, blogging and micro-blogging environments, social media spaces, and multiplayer games with their attendant online information and strategy websites

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(Thorne & Fischer, 2012). As settings for language contact, digital communication media juxtapose and often make publicly visible communication from individuals that represent great diversity in terms of spatial location, social positioning, and language-culture background. Emerging arrays of online environments now constitute primary settings through which routine constructions of identity are created, and curated, through the use of textual and multimodal expression, some of which arguably involve new literacies, communicative genres, hybrid linguistic varieties, processes of group formation, and social practices (Jenkins, 2006; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Thorne, 2009).

Digital environments have opened up possibilities for engineering communicative settings for second language (L2) learning as well as for language intensive interaction in preexisting bi- and multilingual communities. Earlier review articles in ARAL (i.e., Kern, Ware & Warschauer, 2004; Thorne & Black, 2007; Warschauer & Grimes, 2007) have presented overviews of research addressing the use of digital environments in L2 learning contexts. This article will extend these earlier treatments, focusing specifically on current scholarship, and will emphasize issues of identity in digital settings either as a design element of educational practice or as a function of participation in noninstitutionally located online cultures. We then present a discussion of research methodologies employed in a subset of these studies. The final section addresses new frontiers and communication in the digital wilds, as it were, and here we focus exclusively on cultural production in fandom sites, which are generally independent of formal instructional settings.

Informed by a substantial volume of language and identity-related research (e.g., Block, 2007; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Gee, 2004; Higgins, 2011; Kramsch, 2009; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2011; van Compernolle & Williams, 2012; Zimmerman, 1998), the digital contexts we examine form the nexus of a number of interrelated dynamics that include functionally defined subject positions (such as student, peer, author, expert, novice, and fan/enthusiast, among others), situated versus transportable identities (Zimmerman, 1998), and themes of language choice, stance, and style used to carry out expressive action. Central issues that emerge in the contemporary research reviewed here are, first, whether, and/or to what degree, digital environments shift or ameliorate possibilities for developmentally useful L2 interaction; and second, exploration of the affordances of digital mediation for the performance of social identities.

IDENTITY, TECHNOLOGY, AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

A focus on identity has become a central theme within current applied linguistics research in part because of the ways in which it contextualizes and more holistically frames otherwise compartmentalized aspects of language use and development. This observation is not new, of course, as nearly two decades ago, Firth and Wagner (1997) problematized "mainstream" second language acquisition (SLA) literature for its "general preoccupation with the learner, at the expense of other potentially relevant social identities" (p. 228). Often described as the "social turn" in SLA (e.g., Block, 2003), there is now general acknowledgment of the relevance, and

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value, of approaches that include sociological, ecological, cultural-historical, and distributed orientations. The perspective adopted here is that identity work is a relational process, involving the "social positioning of self and other" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586) that is contingently enacted as a function of the recognition, confirmation, or rejection of other people (Butler, 1990). Indeed, current research problematizes the idea of identity as a priori or categorically stable (Norton, 2000). As Blommaert (2005) has argued, identity is constructively viewed as "*particular forms of semiotic potential, organized in a repertoire"* (emphasis in the original, p. 207), a viewpoint that endorses a "performance approach to identities … as a form of socially meaningful practice" (p. 208). Blommaert continued by suggesting that framing identity as forms of semiotic potential provides a clarifying lens through which access to semiotic resources, social stratification and power relations, and the situated performance of identities can be more clearly understood. For L2 learners, and more generally for participants in settings of all kinds, learning involves developing new, or enhancing existing, performative repertoires. In this sense, notions of "learning" and "identity" are dialectically bound to one another and are emergent of, as well as contribute to, the ongoing formation and organization of social conditions.

Bridging to the theme of technology use in education and broader society, a historical perspective and a few statistics are instructive. In 1995, approximately one and a half years after the world's first graphical web browser was released, 1% of the world's population was connected to the Internet. In the intervening two decades (1995–2015), the Internet and other information and communication technologies have become ubiquitous across everyday life contexts in developed, and increasingly in the developing regions of the world, with more than 40% of the global population currently online (Internetlivestats.com). As described by Thompson (2008), individuals across social classes, age generations, and world regions routinely "curate online personas" in digitally mediated social, recreational, and professional environments as they create, amend, and evolve presentations of individual and group identity and affiliation, a process Thurlow and McKay (2003, p. 98) described as "the Internet as learning and lifestyle resource." As the number of global Internet users has expanded, so too have the numbers of tools, online cultures, and opportunities for language contact and engagement, a point that is underscored by the fact that many of the technologies and pedagogical interventions discussed below did not exist, or would have been difficult or impossible to implement, even a decade ago. We also wish to note that even taking into account recent increases in Internet access and penetration, the very topic of identity formation in digital contexts remains overwhelmingly bound to wealthier social strata and regions of the world.

BACKSTORY: THE ADVENT OF WIDESPREAD TECHNOLOGY USE IN L2 EDUCATION

Relatively early Internet studies research, those carried out in the 1990s in particular, focused on the power of anonymity in digital, typically text-mediated

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environments and emphasized the seemingly extraordinary capability of participants to construct relationships and identities and to create with others distinctive social ontologies and online cultures (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Rheingold, 1993). Turkle (1995, p. 321), for example, described Internet-mediated environments as "doing more than providing an evocative object for our self-reflection ... it is the basis for a new culture of simulation and a fundamental reconsideration of human identity." One of Turkle's (1995, p. 13) informants contrastively described his real life (RL) and digital "realities" as follows: "RL is just one more window and it's not usually my best one." This comment reflects the at-that-time evolving perception that digitally mediated experience is as "real," and potentially as meaningful and satisfying, as nonmediated forms of social interactivity and engagement. While relative anonymity is still common in many online settings, in contrast to reports from Turkle's informants in the early 1990s, the contemporary era of ubiquitous forms of mediated communication, social-networking technologies, online gaming, and Internet interest communities illustrate a tendency toward social dynamics that interpenetrate with, and amplify, offline identities (Merchant, 2006; Miller & Slater, 2000).

In part informed by the *zeitgeist* represented by the research described above, applied linguistics research in the area of digital mediation has from its inception considered issues of agency and identity in an effort to better understand, and to leverage for purposes of improving educational processes and outcomes, the affordances and constraints of participant structures (Philips, 1972) that digital environments make possible. In institutionally located face-to-face instructional settings, for example, classroom discourse studies have documented pervasive teacher-centered discourse patterns such as initiation–response–evaluation (feedback) (or IRE/F; Mehan, 1979), wherein a teacher initiates an interaction with a question, a student responds, and the teacher subsequently evaluates or provides feedback (see also van Lier, 2000). Against this backdrop, in the early 1990s, notions such as the flexibility and hypertextual architecture of the "electronic writing space" (Bolter, 1991) and "floorless" dynamics of synchronous text were greeted as disruptive technologies (to use the contemporary term) with the potential to transform the nature of written communication. As L2 uses of Internet and local area network technologies began proliferating, research suggested a number of pedagogical benefits such as increased overall language production and turns at talk in comparison to face-to-face classroom discussion, increased morphosyntactic features expressed, and higher rates of participation in online discussion (Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). Computer-mediated discussion was widely acknowledged as heralding a new age of community building through communication (e.g., Rheingold, 1993), one that supported radical reform to educational practice. Speaking to this issue, Kelm (1996) stated that "technology allows language instructors to function in new roles: designer, coach, guide, mentor, facilitator. At the same time the students are able to be more engaged in the learning process as active learners, team builders, collaborators, and discoverers" (p. 27).

Do these early assessments and aspirations remain valid today, some 15–20 years later? We begin with a look at L2 research on identity in educationally

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oriented uses of Internet technologies and follow this with a discussion of research methodologies employed by the studies we review.

IDENTITY IN INTERSTITIAL CONTEXTS: EDUCATIONALLY ROOTED USES OF DIGITAL MEDIA

As the use of digital tools and environments has become more commonplace in and around language classrooms, identity research in instructional contexts has explored the dynamic tension and sophisticated identity work that learners engage with as a result. Such dynamic tensions stem in part from the inside versus outside of class boundaries that are bridged by the introduction of computer-mediated interaction and which potentially require the negotiation of multiple identities on the part of learners and their interlocutors. As is clear in a number of the studies discussed below, this is especially the case with the use of vernacular, or noneducationally designed, media and social-networking sites (SNSs) that students may have long histories with outside of academic settings (Thorne, 2003). One lens through which to view this tension, proposed by Zimmerman (1998), is to consider learners' situated and transportable identities. Situated identities describe expected roles and behaviors that are relevant to a specific context of communication; for example, in face-to-face classroom contexts, salient situated identities include institutionally defined subject positions such as teacher and student (Richards, 2006), while situated identities within computer-mediated interaction may reflect that of tutor, peer, expert, or collaborator. In contrast, transportable or "categorical" identities reflect visible or culturally claimable characteristics of the learner, such as nationality, first or primary language(s), presented gender, age, and ethnicity, that can possibly be invoked or oriented to during interaction, but may otherwise remain latent or implicit (Van De Mieroop & Clifton, 2012).

Tensions between situated and transportable identities are often intertwined with the norms and affordances of the technologies that learners are using. In Harrison and Thomas's (2009) semester-long ethnographic study of learners on Livemocha, this tension manifested in how participants responded to the requirement of this language learning SNS for inputting information about themselves. Livemocha does not allow users to set the level of impression management in relation to other users. This caused feelings of unease due to the high level of openness required by the site and resulted in many learners deliberately reporting false information, such as country of origin and native language. In order to maximize opportunities for interaction and relationship building, these learners redesigned visible aspects of their transportable identities to map on to what they considered to be more valued situated identities within the site.

A similar tension around disclosure of one's offline identity was reported in Pasfield-Neofitou's (2011) examination of the informal online communication between 12 Australian university students and 18 Japanese contacts. Examination of electronic discourse generated across a variety of platforms revealed that participants' identity performances and level of personal disclosure differed across

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mediums, particularly when disclosure of a transportable identity (e.g., being non-Japanese) led to mocking and exclusion on sites that were dominated by native Japanese speakers who were not welcoming of learners of the language. In digital contexts that explicitly support interaction across multiple languages, however, multilingual writers have been shown to use social network sites as hybrid third spaces through which they can construct personal and collective identities that articulate with local as well as global concerns. This was exemplified in a study by Chen (2013) that focused on two multilingual participants who used Facebook to strategically initiate conversations, to build relationships with audiences across different social and cultural groups, to establish identities as multilingual speakers, and to eventually come to see themselves as users, rather than learners, of English (see also Reinhardt & Chen, 2013).

Less driven by the affordances and limitations of specific technology environments is the negotiation of transportable identities explored in the research of Kim and Brown (2014) and Klimanova and Dembovskaya (2013). In both studies, L2 learners' communicated in a variety of CMC (computer-mediated communication) contexts with native speakers of the target languages (Korean and Russian, respectively). In the underresearched area of the relationship between pragmatic competence and L2 identity in online environments, Kim and Brown (2014) found that the use of address terms was a significant site for identity negotiation. The case studies of four L2 learners of Korean revealed different patterns of honorific and kinship term use with their Korean interlocutors that sometimes reflected real-world relationships and statuses (e.g., relative age, marital status, professional respect) and at other times deliberately violated pragmatic norms for the purpose of humor and relationship building. Klimanova and Dembovskaya's (2013) study of an online intercultural exchange between U.S. learners and Russian native speakers, however, illustrates the potential difficulties of identity negotiation between learners and native speakers when a structurally presumed situated identity does not map to one's perceived and desired transportable identity. At the outset of the online intercultural exchange, participants had already formed assumptions about the identities of their interlocutors based on available profiles and information from the instructors, in particular, that the Americans were all learners of Russian. As the interaction progressed, the American heritage speakers of Russian used a variety of strategies to discursively renegotiate these categorical situated identities as language learners of Russian to that of legitimate Russian speakers.

In a related study, Vandergriff (2013) reported on processes of identity negotiation required to counteract task-imposed situated identities in an online intercultural exchange. In this research, preservice teachers of English in Sweden were partnered with U.S.-based interlocutors who had been instructed to give focused feedback on predetermined grammar errors that had occurred during a collaborative writing activity. To overcome the institutionally structured situated identity of English language learner imposed on them by the project's task, the Swedish participants engaged in facework, through the use of humor and emoticons, to index and perform their preferred identities as "motivated, competent, easy-going co-participants" (p. 404). Contrasting research shows that difficulties achieving

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desired identity performances in online intercultural exchanges are not restricted to L2 speakers and learners. Using activity theory as her intervention and analytic framework, Kitade (2014) found that identity conflicts arose among preservice teachers in a Japanese teacher education program who, as part of an intercultural exchange, tutored L2 learners of Japanese from several countries. Being positioned as native Japanese speakers and tutors caused these participants to struggle with whether to accommodate the learners' expectations of talking about family and culture or to model Japanese norms. In addition, their own uncertainty regarding how to explain grammar errors destabilized their confidence as native speaking experts, but in a positive sense, it also served to raise the teachers' awareness of the complexity of L2 educational practice.

Attempts to foster an educational community through online means has also revealed ways in which learner investment is necessary for the development of a communal identity. Illustrating this case is a failed mobile community blog project reported by Petersen, Divitini, and Chabert (2008). This action research involved 33 Norwegian learners of French, of whom 19 traveled to France for part of the semester. The blog was established at the outset of the term on the assumption that it would foster a group identity among all learners, both those who would travel to France and those remaining at home. However, the blog was rarely used, due in part to the fact that these learners felt stronger identity ties to other campus communities. Essentially, a lack of investment mitigated communicating via the blog, which in turn inhibited the development of a group identity. This failed attempt at forging an online community stands in contrast to those explored by Guamán (2012) and Nelson and Temples (2011). The former study examined the identity representation on Facebook of teen learners of English in a public school in Bogota, Colombia. The project included specifically designed tasks that allowed learners to portray aspects of their local social identities, such as creating and commenting on one another's online graffiti shared in the Facebook group Dragster Virtual Community, which was created for this project. In a study of preservice teachers, Nelson and Temples (2011) used communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) as a theoretical framework to explore how aspiring teachers negotiate memberships in multiple communities during an international exchange program. As part of their course load, participants were enrolled in a fully online class in intercultural communication, whereby they constructed their identities through written communication via a discussion board. The goal of the project was to afford these aspiring teachers the experience of many of their future students, namely, to become immersed in the culture of another country with different norms and unfamiliar educational systems. Analysis of these data illustrated the difficulty and complexity of developing professional identities in unfamiliar cultural contexts, but also suggested that the online course and attendant community aided students in this process.

Reinhardt and Zander (2011) provided an empirical examination of the use of an SNS by students enrolled in an intensive English program. The project utilized language socialization and the bridging activities model (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) to design and interpret an intervention to foster critical awareness of English language communicative practices common to SNSs and participation in social

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network games. The implementation results were mixed. While the majority of the students were already frequent users of SNSs and participated vigorously in the project, others resisted the use of social media in part because such activity was not seen as relevant to the situated identity they associated with being a student. Ironically, the purpose of the SNS intervention was precisely to encourage English language communication associated with transportable (nonacademic) identities. Reinhardt and Zander detailed the risks and rewards of SNS use and, in this way, provided a useful corrective to the typically more optimistic literature on this topic. In another study utilizing Facebook, Mills (2011) created a project that encouraged students to create and evolve a fictive identity in a fictional "global simulation community" on Facebook. Informed by theories of development that highlight joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoires (Wenger, 1998), Mills reported that the participants' role-playing activity as tenants in the virtual-physical context of an *immeuble* (apartment building) in Paris resulted in experimentation with informal and Internet genres of French and media sharing related to music, film, and activities in Paris. Additionally, the global simulation community afforded opportunities for interpretive, creative, and interpersonal engagement within a context that emphasized a theatrical genre of situated identity development.

To conclude this section, we explore a set of diverse studies that have examined how identity is discursively constructed through computer-mediated discussion in learner–learner and learner–instructor interactions. Sauro (2009) applied Davies and Harré's (1990) notion of positioning to bimodal task-based chat interaction between two university students of English. After initially being positioned by her peer in a secondary role in the voice-chat modality, one learner strategically used the text-chat channel to reassert a leadership role in the discourse, suggesting that further research on power dynamics and identity formation playing out across multiple communicative modalities is needed. Two additional studies have shed light on how instructors discursively position students and construct their own identities in different types of computer-mediated interactions. Simpson (2013) examined how blog interactions maintained situated identity positions that aligned with those in other learning contexts, in essence demonstrating that in this case, blog-based discourse reproduced well-established classroom hierarchies rather than affording learners a broader range of identity positions. In an online intercultural exchange in which teachers kept reflective journals, Menard-Warwick, Heredia-Herrera, and Palmer (2013) explored how instructors discursively analyzed the intercultural nature of their own and their students' identities in facilitated international chat sessions. This discursive identity work included efforts to shift from predominantly national concerns to those that addressed global and local concerns.

In the research discussed in this section, identity performance in the interstitial relations between explicit instruction and generally more open digital contexts is a fluid and dynamic construct that encompasses, but often extends beyond, teacher–student or expert–novice dichotomies. Identities shift over time, and even within an interaction, which suggests that educators can potentially enhance learning opportunities by engaging students in ways that evoke their transportable identities

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during classroom talk (Richards, 2006). Such practices may stimulate a higher level of personal involvement, effort, and investment that may afford learners the opportunity to express themselves in ways that extend to broader contexts of significance.

The roles of computer technology and the Internet in our lives provide opportunities for the creation of alternative identities and modes of self-presentation. Such possibilities also open up avenues of inquiry into the relationship between situated and transportable identities that are in good part always fragmented and multiply constructed across discourses and fields of practice. As everyday semiotic and identity building practices undergo significant shifts as a result of technological mediation, it would seem appropriate that L2 educational practice should respond by providing learners with guidance regarding the negotiation of intercultural communication, relationship development, and identity management in a variety of online settings. As the above review makes clear, digital environments present both affordances for and challenges to institutionally located instructed L2 education (see also Kern, 2014). To help incorporate into instructed L2 settings the unstable and rapidly evolving social practices and linguistic resources that constitute many online environments, a number of recent proposals have outlined pedagogical approaches such as multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996), design (Kress, 2005), bridging activities (Thorne, 2013; Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008), and from an ecological and distributed language perspective, the work of Zheng & Newgarden (2012), each of which presents structured ways for students and instructors to collaboratively analyze and ultimately gain the ability to contribute to diverse online social formations.

In the next section, we turn our attention to the methodologies used in the studies just reviewed.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Methodological approaches to learner identity in instructed contexts have taken into account not only the discourse, situated, and transportable identities (Zimmerman, 1998) that emerge from the interaction record (written or spoken), but also learners' perspectives, stated intentions, and motivations associated with identity construction processes. In digital environments, the interaction record often comprises graphically rendered texts that are examined based on approaches generally traceable to forms of grounded theory, discourse analysis, and conversation analysis. The latter two approaches attempt to map the phenomenological experience of participants, which is trickier to adequately capture and evaluate, though it is essential in supporting assessments and hypotheses (through triangulation) that are based on the interaction record (see also Kasper, 2012).

Starting from a variety of theoretical perspectives, the research described above has been largely qualitative in nature, with hints at (qualitatively dominant) mixed methods approaches (see also Blyth, 2008). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a purely quantitative approach to identity research when the key construct itself is so complex and difficult to clearly operationalize. However, as more conceptual

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work in this area gives rise to pedagogically relevant and empirically robust models of identity (e.g., Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Zimmerman, 1998), one may expect a gradual increase in mixed methods approaches to investigations of learner identity, for example, those that explore the role of identity in the interplay of interaction, environment, learner characteristics such as motivation, and L2 development (e.g., Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

Of the studies examined in this section, all were either exclusively qualitative or heavily qualitative with some minor quantitative elements. These self-described methodologies include the following: action research, case studies, grounded approaches, and ethnographies. The number of participants in these studies ranges widely from 1 to 61, as did the duration of the studies, which ranges from 2 days to 29 months.

A consistent feature across studies of identity in digital environments is the presence of multiple layers of data that typically include participant interviews. In the studies above, interviews were carried out in one of three ways. The first was to employ semistructured interviews in order to collect demographic data on participants and/or to glean information on learner attitudes and perceptions. The second use was relatively open-forum semistructured interviews, typically occurring near the end of the study, used to open the door for learners to volunteer information. It seems that such information could be gathered more efficiently with a well-constructed questionnaire. The third use of interview data was that which points participants directly to specific elements in the interaction data. It is this third type of interview approach that can help overcome one of the more challenging methodological issues facing this type of research; namely, the extent to which we can understand and interpret, rather than simply report on, the discursive dimensions of L2 identity enactment. Acknowledging critiques of self-report data, we note that many of the recent studies seem aware of this phenomenological challenge and use interviews in order to triangulate and validate the researchers' interpretations of the data presented by learners' artifacts. Klimanova & Dembovskaya (2013), for example, employed discourse analysis methods to track each instance of learner "identity-in-the-making" and argued that they could not adequately understand the meaning of individual L2 learners' experiences with their social-networking environment from the discourse data alone. They found it essential to employ interpretive phenomenological analysis of the participants' experiential accounts elicited through interviews conducted throughout the study. In this way, they were able to focus on the lived experience of the participant resulting in improved interpretations of their students' interactions with their Russian peers via *VKontakte.* As one example, it became clear in an interview with one participant that what he chose *not* to post on the SNS was crucial in the construction of his Russian speaker identity. In another example, it was only through this reflective engagement with the participant's account of her experience that her dissatisfaction with a task became visible. Her goal of reestablishing her Russian heritage by bonding with a Russian native speaker was thwarted by her instructor's desire to get her involved in a more focused, topic-specific conversation.

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Chen (2013) used semistructured interviews to explore participants' "authorial intent." This approach helped uncover learners' actual practice and illuminate their voices and beliefs, allowing for a more complete analysis of the data. For example, one Chinese user responding to an interview question targeting her active and extensive use of English in SNS postings reported that since Facebook is an English-mediated space, she tried to use the language and establish herself as a *user*, rather than a *learner* of English in order to fit into "that place."

The timing of interviews is also an important consideration. Those studies that maximize the potential of interview data spread these individual sessions out across the duration of the study. Kim and Brown (2014), for example, conducted biweekly retrospective interviews with learners. In this case learners were asked to provide further contextual information about transcripts and also give verbal reports explaining their use of specific forms of address in Korean. Likewise, Klimanova & Dembovskaya (2013) interviewed each participant twice during their study (once at Week 3 and once during the last week), and participants were asked open-ended questions and encouraged to share "emotionally loaded accounts" of their experience. In addition to the timing of interviews, the language in which they are conducted is very important when trying to uncover instances of identity-in-the-making. Pavlenko (2007) argued that the presentation of events may vary greatly with the language of the telling. This view suggests that where possible, one should conduct identity-related interviews in the first language (L1) of the participant, especially with those at lower proficiency levels. Even with carefully constructed, targeted, and well-timed interviews, learner accounts of their experiences are "situated and contested accounts of reality" (Kim & Brown, 2014), and the language of expression will necessarily influence the discursive features that subsequently form the basis for analysis.

In the following section, we segue toward an examination of identity in non-instructionally oriented contexts (the digital wilds), with a specific focus on transcultural and often bi- and multilingual authoring in fandom communities.

NEW FRONTIERS: IDENTITY PERFORMANCE IN THE DIGITAL WILDS

It is a common conception, often warranted, that the development of the Internet has made possible virtual online communities (e.g., Rheingold, 1993), defined as "groups of people with common interests who interact through the Internet and the Web, such as communities of *transactions* and communities of *interest*" (Vossen & Hagemann, 2007, p. 59). Fandom expressed through interactive discourse in various social media venues shows many aspects of cohesion and group identification, yet it is also the case that forms of participatory culture and new media engagement stretch and sometimes problematize common definitions of "community" and processes such as "dialogue" (Thorne & Ivković, in press).

The move from interstitial online environments to online environments in the wild introduces several contexts where identity is performed and negotiated in

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collaborative creative spaces. One of these is online media fandom, a major focus of study within the field of fan studies, itself a relatively recent offshoot of cultural studies (Duffett, 2013). Media fandom is also the subject of a body of studies within applied linguistics that has primarily looked at individual enthusiasts and their translocal fandom affiliation and identity performance (e.g., Lam, 2006)

Within fan studies, definitions of what it means to be a fan range from those that emphasize fervent interest or obsession with a particular celebrity, television show, movie, book, band (Hills, 2002), or online game (Thorne, 2012), to those that emphasize the transformation of media consumption into a form of cultural production (Jenkins, 2006). Outside of fandom, perhaps the best known of these cultural products is fanfiction, a type of creative writing in which fans draw upon and transform, or "remix," existing popular culture media to create their own original texts (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). However, a definition of online fanfiction must also be augmented by another key feature that characterizes it—the active audience and fandom community. Specifically, the act of writing fanfiction extends beyond writing stories about existing characters and figured worlds to also encompass writing these stories for a target audience of readers who are actively seeking out these stories and possibly writing their own (Jamison, 2013). It is primarily within this community of online readers and writers that applied linguistics has explored identity performance in online media fandom.

A segment of the research on online fans has examined identity as a fluid or hybrid construct (Black, 2005, 2006) and explores how fans shape-shift identities through the different mediascapes and technologies available to them (Lam, 2006). This dynamic process of identity performance draws not only on the popular texts fans are responding to but also upon the specific affordances and constraints that social media sites offer (Leppänen, Kytölä, Jousmäki, Peuronen, & Westinen, 2014). Several case studies (Black, 2009; Thorne & Black, 2011) of adolescent English language learners' fanfiction writing on *Fanfiction.net* (FFN), a major multifandom archive founded in 1998, exemplify this process. Examination of these fans' developing literacy practices and identity building include how they presented themselves on FFN's author pages, in the Author's Notes accompanying each story, as well as through the fanfiction stories themselves. For instance, when publishing the first chapter of a piece of fanfiction, anime fan Nanako relied on the Author's Notes to disclose that she was a new writer to that fandom, situating herself with respect to the community she was writing within (Black, 2006). In subsequent updates to this multichapter fanfiction, Nanako then disclosed her status as an L2 speaker of English to negotiate the types of feedback she was open to receiving from her readers (Thorne & Black, 2011). Over time, however, and as she established herself as a successful writer, Nanako began foregrounding other aspects of her identity which also informed aspects of her fanfiction, specifically her identity as a young woman of Asian heritage.

Similar practices were observed among two other fan writers, Cherry-Chan and Grace, who also used Author's Notes to foreground aspects of their identities related to being L2 speakers of English, which they emphasized textually through the use of bolding and punctuation when they began posting fanfiction (Black,

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2009). Over time, as they established themselves as writers, other aspects of their identity were brought out in the fanfiction texts themselves. Such was the case with Grace, who began infusing her anime fanfiction with Christian themes, which served as a stepping stone toward her development of an online Christian youth ministry after several years. In such cases, the foregrounding of different aspects of identity were in response to the communication needs within the community of fan readers and writers on FFN and used the specific norms and tools offered by this particular archive.

A concept related to the fluidity of identity is identity plurality, explored by Lam (2006), who drew upon the shape-shifting practices that young people engage in as they develop new skills and qualities associated with digital technologies required by the workplace. These online mediascapes and shifting technologies provide opportunities for youth to fashion and shift their online identities to encompass the expertise they develop through the creation of cultural products, which include but are not limited to fanfiction. Such was the case with Lee, one of Lam's (2006) case study participants, whose family had emigrated to the United States from Hong Kong when he was 9 years old and whose cultural production took the form of an anime fan website. In this online fandom space, Lee adopted the Japanese name Atarus Mitsui as his identity in a nod to one of the characters in the anime series. Through the sharing of links and multimedia on his website and the support he offered to other online collaborative projects (e.g., the gathering and dissemination of anime music and movies), his online identity gained reputation as a helpful webmaster and valued expert within the fandom. Concurrently, in his American school, Lee received little interest or validation for his language or technical expertise. Thus it is through his online fandom involvement that Lee was able to reposition and redefine himself.

Using online fandom spaces to help negotiate identity conflict is another practice that has been observed in fanfiction writing, particularly in the Mary Sue fanfiction of young female Finnish authors (Leppänen, 2008). In this type of fanfiction, called an "author insert," the writer emplaces herself as an original character (a Mary Sue) into the fictionalized world of the source text. In Leppänen's study, these Mary Sue fanfiction stories explored nonsexualized romances, sometimes even taking the form of parody, between the Mary Sue character and a male character from the source text. These nonsexual and sometimes humorous Mary Sue fanfiction stories interrogated or critiqued sexuality identity scenarios and images of women's sexuality prevalent in the broader offline Finnish society, including the accepted norm of young women engaging in sexualized relationships in their midteens. However, full self-insertion is not necessary for writers of fanfiction to do similar sorts of projective identity work. By infusing some aspect of themselves or their offline challenges into more troubling and darker fanfiction stories that use exclusively characters from the source text, teenage writers expressed and confronted the frustrations and fears they face regarding sexualized relationships (Leppänen, 2008), school violence, or suicide (Black, 2005).

Language choice in fanfiction is another means through which fans perform identity, often to disclose offline identity in online fandom spaces and to signal

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membership or expertise. Black's (2009) adolescent anime fan writers used their fanfiction to disclose their knowledge of other languages (i.e., Mandarin Chinese or Japanese) through in-story character dialogues. This served to highlight a cosmopolitan and insider identity for these fans of a Japanese popular text that attracted an international fandom. Similarly, the use of Japanese by Finnish anime fans revealed the authors' affiliation with the Japanese-speaking world of anime and manga (Leppänen, 2009). In other cases, Finnish writers who shift between English and Finnish in their Mary Sue fanfiction stories, based on a U.S. television series, displayed their translocal identities (Leppänen, 2007; Leppänen, Pitkänen-Huhta, Piirainen-Marsch, Nikula, & Peuronen, 2009). In these bilingual stories, Finnish was used for certain characters, but English was used for other characters or other aspects of the story, thus demonstrating the authors' knowledge of the language and culture of the source material and comfort with the nonforeignness of English within the local Finnish context. Thus, switching between languages indexed the writers' transnational identity, bilingualism, and affinity as fans (Leppänen, 2007).

Thus far, identity research in online fandom within applied linguistics has tended to foreground competence and expertise by focusing on the practices of fans who are often positioned as youth (e.g., Leppänen, 2008) or as developing writers (e.g., Black, 2008). However, online fandom is a diverse space in which other aspects of identity beyond these are objects of intense negotiation or conflict as participants navigate marginalizing discourses within the broader society and within fandom itself. These include language and identity issues related to gender and sexual orientation (Duffett, 2013) such as the negotiation of preferred pronouns for those who identify as transgender or genderqueer and the use of the affordances of different social media sites (e.g., "About" pages and tags on Tumblr) to educate others or to comment on misgendering in source material or fan created texts. Another site of identity conflict and negotiation within fandom spaces concerns race and ethnicity, exemplified by the practice of racial and ethnic identity disclosure during critiques of racism, cultural appropriation, and whitewashing found in popular media or in the works of other fans (e.g., see RaceFail '09, n.d.). Yet another area rich for identity research includes the covert bilingualism (Hult, 2014) practiced by multilingual fans in often English-dominant fan spaces who choose not to disclose their linguistic background or offline nationality in order not to be pigeonholed or treated as deficient in English in fandom communities. Taken together, these identity practices and tensions within online fandom present rich areas for exploring the manner in which identity is negotiated, performed, and used to critique or reinforce the dominant discourses of popular media in translocal and multilingual online fandom spaces.

CONCLUSION

Mediational means such as Internet communication and information tools both complicate and help to reveal the dynamics of human communicative activity and our species' capacity for creative expression through identity performance.

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In physical space, L2 learners are often ascribed defined roles based on their physical characteristics, history of classroom interactions, and institutional positioning that ostensibly correlates with language ability. As reported above, these very structural dynamics were in some cases reproduced in online environments—well-intentioned and reasonably designed and implemented uses of technology do not always deliver on their initial promise. This said, findings also suggest that Internet-mediated interaction, both within and outside of educational settings, has the potential to provide L2 learners with a range of possibilities for engaged self-representation and the construction of identities as capable communicators. While technology may usefully destabilize situated identities in some contexts (and not others), there is ample evidence that enhancing one's ability to be semiotically agile and adept across communicative modalities should be a primary focus of instructed L2 education. In other words, more formal genres of oral communication and historically stable epistolary and literacy conventions, as well as the identity dispositions these semiotic repertoire's index, remain critically important and should occupy the core of L2 educational practice. This said, for L2 education to remain relevant to the lives of learners, we suggest increasing explicit attention to the patterned engagements that make up high-frequency, and increasingly high-stakes, online speech communities and conventions, many of which differ substantially from their face-to-face and conventional literacy siblings.

As Lemke (2002, p. 68) has described, drawing upon Bakhtin, "language competence … is as much an ensemble of virtual identities as a language itself is an ensemble of heteroglossic voices." Exploring the relationships between digital mediation, communicative activity, and identity performance is an animated area of research and one that will remain continuously fresh as the assemblage of human generated tools, cultures, and semiotic practices continue to evolve.

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This book presents an ethnographic analysis of adolescent English language learners' fan fiction authoring and participation in attendant online communities. This research illustrates that fan fiction communities provide rich opportunities for the engaged and interactive use of English, as well as other languages, that resulted in improved composition skills through the creation of narrative identities that developed over time.

Chen, H. (2013). Identity practices of multilingual writers in social networking spaces. *Language Learning & Technology, 17*(2), 143–170.

This longitudinal study of two multilingual writers illustrates the power and importance of employing mixed methods in examining SNS interaction. Using multiple methods the author was able to illuminate learners' own voices and beliefs, allowing for a more complete analysis of the data. While Facebook allowed both participants to navigate across multiple languages, cultures, and identities, they presented themselves differently in the form, quantity, and quality of their SNS use.

Klimanova, L., & Dembovskaya, S. (2013). L2 identity, discourse, and social networking in Russian. *Language Learning & Technology, 17*(1), 69–88.

This article illustrates the importance of employing dynamic methodologies in researching online leaner identity. In a two-semester study of interaction between nativeand nonnative speakers on the Russian language SNS site *VKontakte*, the researchers explored how L2 learners of Russian and

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Russian heritage speakers discursively established their online L2 identities when interacting with native speakers. They presented clear and compelling benefits of employing interpretive phenomenological analysis of the participants' experiential accounts of the interaction, especially when it comes to illuminating issues related to power relationships in establishing online identities.

Leppänen, S. (2008). Cybergirls in trouble? Fan fiction as a discursive space for interrogating gender and sexuality. In C. R. Caldas-Coulthard & R. Iedema (eds.), *Identity trouble: Critical discourse and contested identities* (pp. 156–179). Houndmillls, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

This study of young fans in Finland explores how young women write different types of fanfiction including genre parodies and self-insert romantic or tragic fanfiction in English to interrogate gender and sexual identities in Finnish society.

Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2011). Identity, language learning, and social change. *Language Teaching, 44*(4), 412–446.

This state-of-the-art article provides an overview of postructuralist approaches to language, identity, power, and constructs such as investment and imagined communities. It also includes an insightful section on digital technologies, identity, and language learning.

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