

NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN AN ONLINE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

Submitted by

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In partial completion of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER of SOCIAL SCIENCE in COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

In the FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

UNIVERSITY OF FORT HARE

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NOVEMBER 2011

Dedication

To my twin sister Nozinhle Mxotshwa James Dube

Acknowledgments

In this long journey, I have triumphed despite all the hardships I encountered. For all other things, it is worth. I believe that these hardships helped me towards the completion of this project. The phenomenal support and contribution throughout this research process cannot be overlooked. In my acknowledgement, I would like to recognise a few people that made it possible for the completion of my project. Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor Jacqueline Marx, co-supervisors Renée Coetzee and Roelf Van Niekerk for their wonderful care, guidance, patience, perseverance, encouragement and direction they gave me from the very first day. You gave me insightful comments and made sure that I remained focused. Roelf Van Niekerk, thank you for the scholarship awarded. It made my journey bearable and easy to travel. Lastly, I am truly thankful to my twin sister, Nozinhle Mxotshwa James Dube for showing interest in my everyday steps in this research. Increasing my anxiety levels kept me going from the very beginning to the very last day of this research project.

Declaration

I Nompumelelo Dube declare that “Negotiating identity in an online virtual environment” is my own work, that all sources used and quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references, and that this article was not previously submitted by me for a degree at another university.

Nompumelelo Dube

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Abstract

This study investigates ways in which people in an online anonymous virtual environment use language to negotiate and manage their identities. The study is informed by the tenets of social constructionism, a theory that explores the problematic manner in which the self is taken for granted as unchanging (Burr, 1998). One point made by alternative theorists other than social constructionist theorists is the notion of the “essential self”; one tenet of social constructionist theory suggests that the “essential self” of a person remains fluid. The implication is that one ultimately changes as each day passes, for example at the core of one’s personality is an “essential self” that changes with experiences, conflicts and/or age (Tuffin, 2005). From a social constructionist perspective, the self is more fractured and contingent on life’s circumstances. This theory was found to be an appropriate paradigm from which to study anonymous online identities, where individuals were found to create and negotiate certain identities outside of those identities that people often find important to portray to outsiders in the general public. Sixty-seven (67) students from different races participated in this study and online discussions from a course discussion forum, “blackboard”, were monitored. This study found that one’s identity is negotiated in an anonymous virtual environment. Data was collected from these discussions and was analysed using Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) method of discourse analysis. Research findings ultimately found that people use discursive strategies in negotiating and maintaining their identity online, but that distinct racial characteristics were noticeable despite some attempts to mask one’s background.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Many people participate in online social networks to keep in touch with friends, family, and work colleagues. Many more, however, log on to meet new people, or to discuss issues with people whom they have never met. In these instances identity construction and self-representation need to be negotiated in an environment where the usual visual signifiers are often absent. Since the virtual environment highly restricts the elements that an individual can attach to clearly convey their identity to other people, it becomes important for people online to properly represent their identity to other online users. As a result, they adopt discursive strategies and discourses to negotiate and maintain their identity in this online anonymous virtual environment.

1.1 Aim

The main aim of this research is to elucidate how identities are negotiated and maintained in an online anonymous virtual environment.

1.2 Objectives

In order to meet the major aim of this research, the objectives of the study were to:

- Post discussion topics in the second year Psychology course on Blackboard, which is a server-based virtual learning environment (VLE), accessed through a web browser.
- Conduct purposive sampling on second year Psychology students, who would be expected to respond to these topics. In so doing, they would draw from particular discourses in ways that reflect how they negotiate and maintain their identities in an online anonymous virtual environment.

- Analyse the students' discussion postings in the form of digital textual data from a discourse analysis perspective, as proposed by Potter and Wetherell (1987), with the aim of identifying discursive repertoires, the way in which these discursive repertoires position students, and the role of this positioning in constructing and negotiating identity online.

1.3 Rationale and Significance of the study

There are existing research studies that have been conducted (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002; Perrota, 2006), that expound on the construction of identities in an anonymous virtual environment. Thus the study hopes to contribute to this growing field of research by taking into account conclusions drawn by the said scholars and noting the instances when this particular research projects concurs or challenges these conclusions.

1.4 Structure of the research

The dissertation is composed of five chapters. Chapter one gives an introduction to the research project. It outlines the rationale and significance of the study, aims, research question and objectives of this study. Chapter two draws attention to existing research studies that have looked at identity politics in the context of social networking sites. It also highlights the discourses that people collectively construct and use to negotiate and maintain their online identity. Chapter three offers discussion of the research design, description of the sample used, methods of data collection, ethics, method of analysis and the assessment of the validity and reliability of this research study. Chapter four details the data analysis and

provides an in depth discussion of the results found. Lastly, chapter five outlines the main findings, value, limitations and recommendations of the study.

1.5 Conclusion

In general, identity has arguably been entangled with distinct visual signifiers. ‘Whiteness’ or ‘Colouredness’, for example, have been partly constructed through both biological ‘markers’ (such as the colour of one’s skin) and more changeable social markers (such as one’s home language, dress or personal values). However, in the absence of these signifiers people draw on different discursive repertoires to negotiate their identity in a online virtual environment. This research thus aims to unpack some of these strategies in order to explore the manner in which people negotiate their identity in a online virtual environment. This aim will be met through posting topics on Blackboard which is a virtual learning environment. Second year psychology students will respond to these topics. Their discussion on the postings will then form the data of this research. The study hopes to contribute to the already existing research in the field of discursive strategies used by people to negotiate their identity on an online virtual environment especially in the South African context.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The construction of identity is often deeply intertwined with distinct visual markers. Specifically people are identified by, for example, their clothes, mannerisms, hair and language. However, in virtual environments people have more opportunity to choose which aspects of their identity are visible. Therefore people in an online virtual environment utilise different kinds of discursive strategies to negotiate and maintain their identity. These strategies include simple strategies, language, interpretive repertoires, positioning, denial, mitigation, reversal, naturalising inequality and blaming the victims and political discourses. Each of these needs to be unpacked at some length, as I do below.

2.1.1 Simple Strategies

People online express and represent themselves in a myriad of ways some of which are of their choosing, and others of which they may be unaware. For instance, in online social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, people determine the visibility of their identities through the application of security settings. Security settings enable users to select who may view their profile, as well as the personal information that can be seen by these people. In unsecured profiles, personal information that is displayed ranges from email addresses, profile pictures, telephone numbers, hometown, to the sex of the user. Such personal information reveals the personal identity of the user to everyone. More often than not, personal information is willingly provided by people online because they want to make connections with others. By displaying as much of their online identities as possible, people are hoping to increase their networks and connections by showing some of their interests that might otherwise go unnoticed or be kept secret in the real world. In other words, the existence

of such network is intricately linked to the manner in which users construct their identities. On the other extreme, some online social network users utilise security settings that completely hide their personal information.

Not only can people online be identified by what they choose to visually display, but they can further be identified by links to certain groups. In support of this, Miller (cited in Kennedy, 2006, p.867) stated, “show me what your links are and I’ll tell you what kind of a person you are”. These links provide information about users, thus users learn more about other users that have joined the same group. In these groups, users interact with each other based on shared interests. The groups provide personal but less private aspects of one’s identity. In a study conducted by Kennedy (2006), it was discovered that African students frequently gave an indication of their ethnicity as they linked to black cultural bookshops, and Asian women linked to sites by and about Asian women.

Talamo and Ligorio (2000) contend that the way in which people respond in a virtual environment is determined by the context of a situation. From this point of view, Schegloff (cited in Talamo & Ligorio, 2000), maintains that positioning is not only seen as an individual move, but it becomes contextually shaped. This suggests that identity negotiated in a context is not only based on what the person decides to reveal about him or herself, but also that the context plays a significant role in guiding and modelling the choices. This has led discourse analysts to argue that in order to make sense of what people say we need to take into account the social context in which they speak. Existing research on internet identity and the issue of anonymity problematises the very notion of anonymity by suggesting that online identities are not as anonymous as many had assumed they were. One particular study

(Kennedy, 2006), contends that people's online identities are often continuous with their offline identities.

2.1.2 Language

Discourse analysis is a theoretical framework that helps in unpacking the discursive strategies used by people to negotiate their identities in an online environment. This framework sees language not as a set of labels that we use to refer to things, but rather as a system of organisation that shapes the way we experience things in the first place. Experience is not just an awareness of what is going on around us, but an interpretation of those things. According to Norton (2000), our culture gives us these interpretations by providing us with language in not only the form of words but systems of interpretation that we use to make the world meaningful.

This is significant in that text is an essential feature of online communication. Although discourse analysis can be performed in a myriad of communication portals, my emphasis is on text given its dominance in the virtual realms. Discourses are found in texts. Potter and Wetherell (1987) note that discourses are patterns of talk that are used to construct social and psychological realities. Language becomes important in the sense that it is used to create sense and meaning of people's everyday interactions. Consequently, the same systems of explanation that shape our real world experiences and the understanding we have of ourselves in that environment will also structure our online communication and the way in which we present ourselves. In elucidating the previously mentioned point, Frazer (cited in Davies & Harre, 1990), found that young females discursively constructed their social identity, their social world and their place in an online context. By this the author meant that it was

language that determined the way in which they understood and expressed their gender, social class, personal-social identity, and race online.

Language is thus an important discursive strategy that people use to negotiate and maintain their identity in an online virtual environment. The style in which language is used gives people positions within a conversation. Kennedy (2006), for example found that women can be identified in online communication through excessive use of exclamation marks and abbreviations. In this particular study, one female participant communicated her identity as a young woman through the language she used. She extensively used exclamation marks, abbreviations like “coz”, “ya” and “yall” and slang such as “Big up”. Spolsky (1999) maintains that language is an important aspect of human identity. When someone uses language, we can immediately deduce some things about his or her race, gender, education level, age, profession or place of origin. In communities of practise, people collaboratively engage in the use of language and determine repertoires that will be shared by the community. During the process, people determine repertoires that are appropriate and relevant to use in a conversation from those that are not appropriate.

In language use, Bucholtz (1999), maintains that some people are monolingual while others are bilingual. Monolingual speakers hold strongly to the use of their language, whilst bilingual speakers alter the content and register of their language to incorporate the use of the language that belongs to the other group. As such, monolingual speakers will embrace their identity and will tend to engage in positive identity practices. Those who reject the identity of the other group distance themselves from it by using negative identity practises (Bucholtz, 1999). In the case of monolingual and bilingual speakers, the intentions of the speaker are taken into serious consideration whilst the intentions of the listener are completely neglected.

Therefore, Spolsky (1999), says that language is not only used as a way to represent who we are, but is also a way for other people to project their own assumptions of how we should be. Tensions occur when the hearer has a different understanding of the speaker's identity than the one preferred by the speaker. This tension is worsened when the hearer misinterprets the identity of the speaker and assigns an unwanted identity to the speaker (Spolsky, 1999).

Correspondingly Goffman (cited in Gibson, 2004), asserts that the self is constructed in discourse and the choice of language used becomes important. He states that our personal identity is defined by how others perceive and identify our identity and not by how we identify our own identity. The speaker may try by all means to influence how others identify him/her, however the hearer has the ultimate power to assign an identity to the speaker. This gives the hearer the power to construct an identity that is totally opposed to the identity desired by the speaker (Goffman, cited in Gibson, 2004).

As indicated above, language is closely associated with identity. On the same note, Gibson (2004), maintains that language is more often associated with ethnic identity, but in some cases it is not necessarily a tool to determine this identity. For instance a person might define his ethnicity to be Xhosa but not use Xhosa as a primary mode of communication. He or she might use English for communication purposes and cling to symbolic representations of the Xhosa language so as to claim a distinct ethnic identity. Ethnic identity runs deeply to encompass cultural and personal identity (Gibson, 2004). This notion explains the situation where anyone observed to be relinquishing one's literal and symbolic representation of one's 'home' language is accused of abandoning one's cultural, social and personal identities (Gibson, 2004).

Proficiency in several languages that are rejected within an in-group is seen as a threat to integration and harmony of the group (Gibson, 2004). As a result speakers often make use of binaries that aim to differentiate minorities from majority groups. According to Gumperz (1982, p.23), “we versus they” and “high versus low” speech codes are constantly used in such situations. The “we” code is associated with a minority group who suffers low prestige whilst the “they” group refers to the majority group who are held at a high esteem. Therefore, a “we” group might choose to use their language to emphasise their difference with the dominant group and at the same time create comradeship with those who speak the same native language (Gumperz, 1982). These choices occur within conversations and not in situation (Gumperz, 1982).

In conversation, code switching is identified as another form of language use which has the purpose of including or excluding other people from the group (Gibson, 2004). This tendency serves to create a sense of “them” versus “us” (Gibson, 2004, p.9), since outsiders are disabled from easily sharing the codes used within the group. This form of communication has overt and covert rules that are important for the insiders. It serves to mark identity for the insiders. In a study conducted by Mar-Malineró (cited in Gibson, 2004), code switching by Spanish speakers was used to construct an identity for the Spanish speakers based on being ‘Spanish’ as well as maintaining a sense of solidarity.

Since the use of one’s native language is associated with ethnic identity, Bangeni and Kapp (2006), found that students who have been educated in institutions that elevated the status of the native home languages entered university with the desire to preserve their mother language and home identities. Moreover, those students educated in racially mixed schools did not encounter any linguistic boundaries when they entered university. They expressed no

concern over speaking English more frequently than their mother language. This study also highlighted that political discourses dominate people's talk and in turn were used to negotiate particular identities. Specifically, students who spoke English more frequently than their native home language were adopting the political discourse which recognises the right to use any language. This resonates with the discursive underpinnings of the policy of multilingualism that recognises 11 official languages in South Africa (Bangeni & Kapp, 2007). By adopting this political discourse, the speakers believe that everyone has a right to learn and speak any of the 11 official languages without any constraints.

However, in the same study, researchers found that students who took pride in speaking their mother language (which was not English) adopted a different identity to those who preferred English (Bangeni & Kapp, 2007). For them, English was equated with "whiteness". Even though the South African government emphasises the equality of all the 11 official languages, it seems that for these students, it is a symbolic gesture. In explaining the point, Mesthrie (2002) states that the law maintains that all languages should be treated equal and at the same esteem, but the reality is quite different. English has been catapulted to a higher status as it is the most commonly spoken language in general public life, commerce, politics and business and is thus hegemonic in relation to the other African languages (Bangeni & Kapp, 2007).

In the same study, students who opposed the elevated status of the English language reflected the socio-political feelings generally channelled towards a language that is not the native language of the individual concerned (Bangeni & Kapp, 2007). Historically, English has been associated with the so-called upper classes and relative privilege as suggested by Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000). The authors point out that African languages tend to be denigrated in favour of English even amongst African-language speakers.

2.1.3 Interpretive repertoires

Interpretative repertoires represent another discursive strategy used to maintain identity in an anonymous virtual environment. They are linguistic resources that are found in people's conversations. Reynolds and Wetherell (2003, p.7), describe them as "recognisable routines of arguments, descriptions and evaluations found in people's talk often distinguished by familiar clichés, anecdotes and tropes". They function thus as linguistic resources that can be drawn on and used in a conversation to evaluate acts and events. According to Richardson (1996), interpretative repertoires are used with stylistic and grammatical consistency, usually organised around one or more metaphors. Moreover, the choice of which terms or linguistic resources to use is largely determined by the speaker's aims in that specific interactive environment. Other authors (Wetherell & Potter; Edwards, cited in Talamo & Ligorio, 2000) state that people choose which aspects of themselves and others to give salience to, through selecting terms that are in line with their specific aims in that specific moment.

These interpretative repertoires provide people with positions they can take in relation to a topic under discussion. In a study conducted by Bowker and Tuffin (2002), disabled participants maintained that disclosing one's disability in an online interview was purely a matter of choice. The authors describe this form of talk as "a choice to disclose" repertoire. Within the broad "choice to disclosure" repertoire, three key linguistic resources, namely relevance, anonymity and normality were used by disabled people to provide accounts of non-disclosure online. Relevance was built around the idea that disability became appropriate to disclose when it was relevant to the context of the conversation. Anonymity related to the idea that the individual was the only one that knew that she was disabled until such time when personal details were made available to others. Lastly, a normality resource was

organised around the idea that a disabled person remained at par with able bodied people when they did not disclose their disability.

In another study based on 20 discussions regarding problems related to the psychological profession, Perrota (2006), identified three interpretative repertoires which referred to possibilities that were repeatedly mentioned aimed at constructing the profession of psychology and related to professional identity. These interpretative repertoires - professional boundaries, disempowered psychology, and psychology and health - were found in a number of instances and threads. The professional boundary repertoire was based on a number of strategies aimed at establishing clear boundaries between the profession of psychology and other professions. Some strategies identified by these professions included notions on “rejection” and “acceptance”. Aspects of the boundary repertoire were found in 37 instances as related to discussion with participants. The last repertoire was found in 18 instances that raised the idea that there was a need to make a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate psychological professional practices.

These interpretive repertoires allow people to take up particular subject positions within conversations. Moreover, speakers have some agency over the kind of positions they may assume. At the same time, however, they can assign positions to other people in the same conversations. Nevertheless, those who have been assigned a position can deny the position assigned and reposition themselves. A detailed discussion about positioning follows below.

2.1.4 Positioning

According to Harre and Van Langenhove (1999), positioning is used as a discursive strategy to construct personal stories which make actions of a person more understandable to

himself/herself and others. According to Davies and Harre (cited in Lineham & McCarthy, 2000, p.441), positioning is defined as “the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines”. Positioning is either interactive in the sense that what one person says positions another person within a conversation, or it can be reflexive when one positions him/herself in a conversation.

Tirado and Galvez (2007), add that positioning creates a platform in which members in the conversation have specific locations. When people take up positions within a conversation, they suddenly see the world from the view point of that position and in terms of the images, storylines and metaphors related to the discourse which they have positioned (Davies & Harre, 1990). For example, people who assume the subject position of a ‘teacher’ demonstrate speech that is dominated by reprimand, corrections and congratulations (Harre & Van Langenhove, 1999).

Positions change based on story lines that are usually found within discourses which vary significantly in regard to the language used, concepts and issues made relevant together with the positions made available. Initial positions are never static, but can be challenged by other people in the conversation, such that the speaker is repositioned. Actors may thus also stage their positions differently, such that the same words and actions bear one or more conversations. In other words, what is said in a conversation develops and changes as the conversation progresses to such an extent that multiple speech acts exist within a conversation (Davies & Harre, 1990).

According to Davies and Harre (1990), our understanding of the world and who we are, in relation to how we have created ourselves to be, follows a pattern. People start learning categories that differentiate them from others. This is followed by jointly participating in discursive strategies that create meaning associated with these categories. People proceed by positioning themselves in these categories and these are often determined by characteristics they have that fit them suitably in one particular category, but not the other.

People take up positions in relation to the past and present discourses presented in a conversation which often paves the way for emotions such as anger, joy, insecurity, nostalgia, loss, fear, desire for recognition, affiliation, desire for security and safety (Norton, 2000). One's acceptance within the dominant discourse is largely dependent on one's access to the cultural, linguistic, material and social resources that are valued within that dominant discourse. For students to be accepted in the dominant discourse in the university, for example, they are required to act, think and speak within the ideological frameworks of the university (Gee, 1990). However, it becomes difficult for those students who are not fluent in English, because they enter the university without the cultural resources to fit into the university culture. Therefore, they are expected to negate their 'home' identities, which do not fit the dominant discourse in the university. This threatens the identity of these students.

In light of the dominant discourses, the media also plays a major role in perpetuating discourses that can be used by people in negotiating and maintaining their identity in conversations relating to race issues. In these dominant discourses, people belonging to historically-dominant groups that have been accused of racism take on positions belonging to minority groups who happen to be victims in the scenario. These positions are taken and assigned for the purposes of maintaining and negotiating identity.

Van Dijk (1992), mentions that there are various discursive strategies used to deny racism. These have the sole purpose of presenting oneself in a positive light and to save face when accused of racist attacks. These discursive strategies are not only used by the media, but people also adopt and use them in their everyday talk about race. Generally, in post-apartheid South Africa racial slurs and derogatory remarks about other people are not tolerated. Therefore, dominant politically powerful groups usually detest being seen as racist. Thus when they want to pass racist remarks about minority groups, they will make use of discursive strategies such as mitigation, euphemism, excuses, blaming the victim, negative representations of the other, and emotional blackmail. Collectively, these serve to negate the negative assumptions about the actual attitude of the speaker and therefore allow both the speaker and the entire dominant group to which the speaker belongs to be presented in a more favourable light

2.1.5 Denial

According to De la Rey and Duncan (2003), denying racism can take the form of reverse charge. Instead of the dominant members admitting to accusations of racism, they will tend to perceive members of the minority group as the real racists. In this case, denial serves the purpose of differentiating 'us' from 'them', and on the other hand, emphasising social boundaries, social and ethnic identities.

Denial as a discursive strategy used in racial talk is observed when the individual claims that racism is not as rampant as it used to be or even outright denies its existence (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003). In such contexts it is not uncommon for the individual to insist on his or her non-racism. Subtle ways of denial occur when statements said or written about incidences of racism pose doubt, and distance accusations of racism (Van Dijk, 1992). In such instances,

reports insert words, quotation marks and words such as 'claim' and 'allege'. These words and quotation marks simply maintain that the accusations are baseless.

Moral blackmail can be discerned in statements where anti-racists ignore the truth about the multicultural society (Van Dijk, 1992). Usually others are hindered from telling the truth. Van Dijk (1992), argues that there is a need for greater candour when it comes to talking about race. At the same time, the person will be feeling morally blackmailed whilst on the other hand realising that saying negative things about minorities is contrary to the society's norms of tolerance and understanding. For example, newspapers write negative things about African people and claim to be reporting the truth yet no one silences them (Van Dijk, 1992).

2.1.6 Mitigation

Mitigation occurs when racist remarks passed by a speaker are minimised. Such tendencies include claiming that whatever racist claims the speaker may have made are based on facts. Even the word racism is treated as taboo by claiming that it belongs to the past and does not have a place in modern society (Van Dijk, 1992). Instead, terms like discrimination, resentment and xenophobia are used to replace racism and represent everyday forms of racism.

Mitigation involves the use of euphemism and toning down (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003). Thus one may refrain from seeing the act as racist by claiming that race relations are still fragile. These relations are accompanied by misunderstandings and feelings of distrust. In other words, mitigation is used to cast doubt on the capability of the group accused of racism. Instead the racist act is reported to be merely an incident of discrimination, intolerance, bias or prejudice.

2.1.7 Reversal

Reversal is used in instances where those who often complain of being targets of racism are themselves frequently accused of racism (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003). Sometimes, they are accused of being overly sensitive or seeing racism where it does not exist. Subsequently they are positioned within an adversarial role. In elucidating the point, Braudde, (cited in De la Rey & Duncan, 2003), states that instead of white people taking the blame for practising racism, they frequently blame African people for their problems. In other words, white people claim that they are facing social problems due to black racism. As such, labelling African people as racist shifts the focus from a larger socio-political context in which racism resides and is perpetuated.

2.1.8 Negative Representation of the other

One other discursive strategy used in conversation is the negative representation of the other, and is closely related to reversal. This strategy can be noted in the manner in which media features African people primarily in terms of deviant behaviour. Similarly, Mokoe (cited in, De La Rey & Duncan, 2003), noted that white dominated societies report news about African people only when they have done something scandalous. On the contrary, white people are featured in news that portrays them in a favourable light. This discrepancy causes African people to be viewed as criminals and unruly. As a result, this perpetuates patterns of racial inequality.

2.1.9 Naturalising inequality and blaming the victims

Naturalising inequality and blaming the victim is another discursive strategy used in racial discourse. MMP (cited in De la Rey & Duncan, 2003), states that it is a strategy used to

report on racial differences of socio economic inequalities and avoiding the examination of the real structural causes of such inequalities. Within such a framework, racialised patterns of inequality such as poverty and unemployment are constructed as the responsibility of the victims of racism with little attention paid to different factors that perpetuate poverty. This notion is exacerbated by governmental programmes such as affirmative action, which was aimed at correcting the underprivileged position of the black people (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003).

On the other hand, such a programme shifted attention away from the role played racist political administration that was responsible for the underprivileged position of the blacks. Subsequently, the historical context in which racial and structural inequalities emerged is negated. The continued state of racial differences and structural differences is then seen as the responsibility of the government currently in power (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003). In other terms, the message brought forward maintains that the ruling government has failed to come up with policies and programmes that effectively address these structural and racial difference issues. As such, the attention is shifted away from the real causes of racism.

2.2 Political Discourses

Some political discourses are shaped and perpetuated by prominent and influential political activists. These political discourses are then adopted and used by people in their conversations about race relations. For example, Steve Biko's teaching on Black Consciousness has been widely influential in the construction of black racial identity. According to Gibson (2008) in most instances, African people dismiss accusations of racism towards white people by stating that they should be excused because their mind is still in the hands of the oppressor. He further states that this was one of the political discourses that were

championed by Steve Biko when he stated that the greatest weapon that the oppressor has is the mind of the oppressed. Expanding this notion, Biko maintained that black people cannot be racist on the basis that what they portray as racism is the consequence of white racism. A white person accusing a African person of racism is seen as projecting white racist tendencies to that individual and possibly using this stance to ease his or her feelings of guilt (Gibson, 2008).

Post apartheid talk on race has shaped new political discourses that highlight people's desires to move beyond race issues (Gallagher, 2003). One of these emerging discourses is the notion of being colour blind which is often adopted when one wants to be seen as holding a neutral stance towards race. Being 'colour blind' presupposed a neutral stance on the part of the speaker by expressing an attitude that does not take into consideration the racial differences between people (Gallagher, 2003). Thus for example, one will insist on evaluating a person's capabilities on the grounds of competence and qualifications rather than race.

According to Gallagher (2003), the colour blind perspective occurs in a society where institutional racism and discrimination has been abandoned for the adoption of one's qualification in order to achieve upward mobility. Therefore viewing people according to their skin colour is seen as incongruent with the current race relations. However, this notion is not consistently shared by all white and African people. Instead, Gallagher (2003), argues that this may give white people ammunition in the context of affirmative action by noting the ways in which it supposedly favours African people.

Assuming a colour blind perspective creates the impression that there are little or no socio economic differences that exist between racial groups. However, the attitudes of a person maintaining such a perspective may vary depending on the kind of people with whom a

person holding a colour blind perspective associates. For instance, white people who are exposed to upper middle class African people tend to believe that blacks have the same socio-economic opportunities as the white people (Gallagher, 2003).

2.3 Conclusion

People online adopt a variety of discourse strategies to negotiate and maintain their identity in an online virtual environment. Some provide their personal information such as picture, names and gender. Inevitably, this allows fellow users to assume certain notions about the identity of the user. However, other people use more ambiguous and subtle discursive strategies. These include language, interpretive repertoires and positioning. Language is used to make meaning of people's lived everyday experiences. The way in which language is used in a conversation communicates much about the identity of the person.

Interpretive repertoires are linguistic resources found in people's talk. They provide people with positions within a conversation. These linguistic resources help people to negotiate and maintain their identity in an online virtual environment. Furthermore, the media has made use of various discursive strategies when reporting on racism. These strategies include denial, mitigation, reversal, naturalising inequality and blaming the victims. Since the media remains a highly influential portal in society, people have adopted these strategies when talking about racism even outside the cyber environment. In addition, people make use of political discourses which can be found in their everyday talk. These political discourses are used by people online to negotiate and maintain their identity in an online virtual environment.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The research design, sample, methods of data collection, ethics, method of analysis and evaluation of qualitative data will be discussed in this chapter.

3.2 Research Design

A qualitative research design was used in this research study. Strauss and Corbin (1998), state that qualitative research refers to any kind of research where the findings are not produced through statistical methods. This type of research concerns itself with an in-depth inquiry about people's lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, feelings and lives, as well as organisational functioning and interactions between nations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This enquiry produces data in the form of text. Different steps can be followed by the researcher to organise and interpret this data. These steps include conceptualising and reducing data, categorising it according to its properties and dimensions, and relating it through series of propositional statements (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Other authors such as Becker, Charman and Lofland collectively call these steps coding (cited in Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The main aim of qualitative research design is to “provide an indepth and interpreted understanding of the social world, by learning about people's social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories” (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p.22). In this research study, discussion postings were downloaded from the Blackboard learning site. This data was downloaded in the form of text. This textual data was coded and later analysed with the aim of deepening the understanding of how people negotiate and maintain their identity in an online virtual environment.

In addition, this research adopted a case study approach identified by Stake (1994), as an instrumental case study. According to Stake (1998), a case is examined to provide a deeper understanding of the existing phenomena or to expand the existing theory. Instrumental case study was appropriate for this study as it aims to provide insight and understanding of an issue that already exists and has been researched before. In this study, discussion postings about contemporary issues from local newspapers were analysed additionally to facilitate an understanding of the kinds of repertoires drawn from in constructing particular identities.

3.2.1 Sample

The sample for this research was composed entirely of discussion postings on topics that were posted by the researcher on the Blackboard learning site. Blackboard offers an opportunity for anonymous discussion forums and this allows one to pay attention to the aforementioned discursive strategies users employ in taking up particular subject positions. There were 59 discussion postings in total.

3.2.2 Methods of data collection

The researcher designed questions that were informed by the news from local newspapers. Users were asked:

- Why do you think people are calling Jimmy Manyi a racist for saying that coloured people should move to other provinces in South Africa?
- If Jimmy Manyi was White, would it have been such an issue?

The questions were posted while students were away for semester break therefore the discussion board did not generate as many responses as the researcher had intended.

However, the researcher selected some of the discussion postings on default topics posted by the students using the Blackboard discussion forum at the beginning of the year. One of the default questions selected was as follows:

- Why do Black people like speaking English with each other even if they share the same mother language?

The researcher kept the momentum of the discussion going by responding strategically to some of the discussion postings, thus urging participants to stay with the topic and reflect more. These discussion postings were captured in the form of text and formed the body of data that was later downloaded.

3.3 Ethics

Blackboard is an online learning site and is thus an effective platform for discussion forums. It automatically withholds the identity of people who post discussions in this online virtual environment. There was a note posted on Blackboard which informed the students that, from time to time the Psychology Department will use information uploaded into this site for research purposes. It also stated clearly that all identifying information would be changed or omitted such that their identity is kept confidential. By using Blackboard, students who joined automatically consented for the use of their information for research purposes. See attached Appendix A.

3.4 Method of analysis

The data was coded using software for qualitative data analysis, Atlas T.I., which helps to manage and organise large amounts of textual data.

The initial coding phase consisted of reading the extracts to identify patterns of meaning in the data. Extracts that talked about the same issues in a similar way and carried the same meaning were grouped together. Extracts that did not fit in the identified categories were left aside. In order to include the extracts that were left aside, the initial categories were expanded. However, extracts that did not fit on the expanded categories except their own were excluded from the analysis. As a result, a total of 27 codes were identified. In the second phase of analysis, these codes were grouped together into themes in order to simplify and guide the data analysis process. The third phase involved identifying a major theme that encompassed different groups of similar themes. Nine major themes were identified and each of the major themes had sub-themes.

3.4.1 Evaluation of qualitative data

Qualitative researchers need to prove that their research is credible. According to Golafshani (2003), the validity and reliability of qualitative research is determined by the efforts and abilities of the researcher.

In order to improve the validity and reliability of this research, certain steps were taken. The data used in this research was downloaded from the Blackboard learning forum and was organised through numbering every reflection posted. As mentioned previously, this data was fed on Atlas T.I which, by virtue of organising a large body of textual data, helps to enhance the quality of the research. Atlas T.I helps to consistently code the data. Moreover, some of the codes identified were compared with codes from discourse and racism research conducted in a South African context. Codes that were similar with codes identified in this research were used for coding purposes. For instance, discursive strategies used by the media to perpetuate racism, namely denial, mitigation, moral blackmail reversal, naturalising

inequality and blaming the victims, were identified from the existing literature (Van Dijk, 1992). As such the codes used are consistent with the research done previously and this too enhances the validity and reliability of this research. Also co-supervisors that were familiar with the field of using discursive strategies in negotiating identity in an online virtual environment were asked to interpret meanings of certain passages in the data during supervision. These interpretations were similar to the interpretations by the researcher. In doing so, the validity and reliability of the research was improved.

3.5 Conclusion

By making use of a qualitative research design, this research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of one aspect of people's lived experiences. In this research, second year psychology students posted their discussions on topics that were posted on "Blackboard" by the researcher. Blackboard online technology automatically withheld the student's identity, such that their discussion postings remained anonymous. These discussion postings were downloaded as textual data.

The textual data was analysed to provide an understanding of how people online negotiate and maintain their identity in an anonymous virtual environment. An instrumental case study was chosen as suitable for this research as it provides a deeper understanding on the phenomena that has been previously studied which in this context is the construction of identity in the virtual realm. The discussion postings formed the sample of this research.

In order to ensure that this research is credible, the data was fed in Atlas T.I which is a programme that aids in organising and holding together extensive textual data. Furthermore, some of the codes used were consistent with the existing research on racism.

Chapter 4: Results: analysis and discussion

4.1 Introduction

The responses of the participants on racial topics were informed by the dominant discourses and interpretive repertoires that dominate their everyday talk. Some of the discursive strategies that were identified in the discussion postings were consistent with the discursive strategies used by the media (Van Dijk, 1992), to represent issues of racism. These resources were utilised by participants to negotiate their identity online. In these discussion postings, participants assumed and assigned positions to other participants responding to the topics. Therefore, the data analysis will focus on the discursive strategies used within each major theme and its associated sub-themes in relation to identity and positionality. Despite assuming anonymous identities, some students revealed their cultural backgrounds by responding in their Xhosa Language which excluded other non-Xhosa speaking participants.

The later segment of the analysis focuses on the discursive strategies that were utilised by the participants in their talk about African people who prefer to speak English with each other even if they share the same mother language. These discursive strategies included insecurity, class division, conditions of acquiring new language and acts of identity.

Following on this will be extracts which will be used for illustrative purposes as they offer clear examples of the discursive strategies that were used by the participants. The extracts will be followed by the analysis.

After analysing the data using ATLAS T.I program, nine major themes were identified. Each major theme had sub-themes as indicated in table 1 below.

MAJOR THEME	SUBTHEMES
1. Denial	Moral blackmail Not racist Racist is the thing of the past
2. Mitigation	Discrimination Downplaying Euphemism Race relations are still fragile
3. Reversal	Real Racist Reverse Accusations
4. Negative Representations of the other	Associating black people with negative topics
5. Naturalising Inequality and blaming the victims	Focus on racialised patterns of socio-economic inequality and ignoring deeper aspects of such inequality
6. Insecurity	Denying one's identity Feeling Inferior Undermining one's mother language

7. Class Division	Coconuts English is seen as a tool to further divide blackness
8. Conditions of acquiring new language	Exposure Personal Choice
9. Acts of identity	English is seen as symbolising superiority Speaking English is equated with being White Tool for recognition

4.1.1 Denial

The researcher understands “denial” as an umbrella theme consisting of codes denoting discursive strategies used by participants in their everyday conversations about racial issues. For instance, participants refuted that racism exists for them and it was generally conveyed by participants that they avoid racist language and behaviour, particularly as they would be seen in a negative light by others on “blackboard”. The researcher has identified this kind of talk within participants as “denial repertoire”. Within this repertoire, three key resources were identified: “moral blackmail”, “racism is the thing of the past”, and “non-racist persona”. The researcher understood “moral blackmail” to be built around the idea that people desist from censorship when talking about sensitive issues in society, and as one’s censorship prevents people from telling the truth (Van Dijk, 1992).

Message 3: *“Its time dat we as south africans be critical when dealing with social issues, it sould not be that every statement sum1 makes, should be labled as racist. One should look at the bigger picture and acknowledge the statement in the context of whch it is being said”*.

In this example, the participant outlines that not every statement one makes ought to be labelled as racist. Participants reflected that one should look at the “big picture” and acknowledge both the context and the statements of the utterance that which is said. The participant feels morally blackmailed when other people are given the chance to talk about sensitive social issues and are not labelled as racist, yet others are labelled as racist when they adopt the same stance. Consistent with other authors such as (Van Dijk, 1992), people usually feel morally blackmailed when dominant groups talk in any manner about members of an outsider, or minority group, and when the dominant group claims to state the truth about that minority group. It is important however to exercise caution when talking about race issues in this context.

To look at the same statement mentioned above in another way, by saying that “it should not be that every statement someone makes should be labelled as racist”, the participant attacks those people who are quick to label others as racist. For example the participant is quick to suggest that judging those statements made on the virtual site, “blackboard” should be made in context and without quick acknowledgment that all comments have embedded racist meaning. In order to deal with what the participant feels as over-sensitivity to quick judgements on race by others, the participant invites other participants to take on a critical position by stating that *“South Africans should be critical”* and that *“one should look at the bigger picture and acknowledge the statement in the context of which it is being said”*.

Without considering the context in which the comments were passed, the claims of racism

become void. From another point of view, since the comments under scrutiny were passed by a political and influential black person, Jimmy Manyi, white people will be quick to label such comments instigating racism, possibly motivated by the need to find a race that will act as scapegoat in a socio-political South African context which often pits one race against another.

The fact that the participant invites other South Africans to be critical and mentions that online statements should be considered in the context in which they were said, displays some concern over the use of the racial arguments to make one's point. This comment also suggests that there are alternative ways whereby online users think about race which is more critical perhaps than other users (more the average) that utilize a race argument to get points of view across the wider online audience. In other words, the participant is not reactive towards a situation; however he or she considers the context in which the comments were raised. This gives him/her the advantage to evaluate all the factors leading to the situation before passing a value judgement.

The concept of "not racist" is mostly used by dominant groups to avoid being seen as racist (Van Dijk, 1992). Being seen as racist represents a negative personal characteristic that might cause an individual to be evaluated negatively by society in general. Therefore, this strategy is used to stop members of the outer group from channelling negative impressions towards the member of the dominant group accused of racism.

Message 12: "jimmy Manyi was probably suggesting something relevant. He cant be racist because he also experienced being a victim of racism. Come on people.....black people are not racist.. "

In this example, the participant took a position that strongly considered the social norms that are against discrimination and derogation of out groups. Since a negative statement was made by a African political leader, Jimmy Manyi, directed to the coloured population, the participant refuted the notion of a racist by saying “*He can’t be racist because he also experienced being a victim of racism*” to block the negative inferences about the attitudes of the speaker by the recipients. In the same extract, the participant also says “*come on people...black people are not racist*”. In this part of the extract, the participant is seen defending the whole in-group at the expense of the out group (Van Dijk, 1992). In other words, the participant is defending African people from the coloured people.

Based on the above, one wonders why the participant defends African people from the negative evaluations by coloured people. It might be possible that the participant is a African person, which means that negative evaluations of African people as racists will include him. Denying that Manyi is a racist is a stance to free himself from the guilt of being perceived as a racist, hence an attempt to protect the entire African race from a racial attack (in this case an online virtual attack). At the same time, the participant positions African people as individuals who comply with the social norms of understanding and tolerance (Van Dijk, 1992). In addition, stating that African people are not racist brings in the opinions of prominent political figure’s and their influence over others. These influences constitute political discourses that were part of the liberation struggle, which are adopted and used by participants when they talk about racial issues.

Specifically, the participant draws on Steve Biko’s idea that black racism is a myth and is an idea that is used by white people to ease their guilt (Gibson, 2008). However, he is not labelling Jimmy Manyi as a racist, instead, believes that a black person’s racist tendencies are

a consequence of the actions of the oppressor. This position is in line with the political discourse that was logged by Biko who blamed the oppressor for the way African people responded to the ills of apartheid (Gibson, 2008).

Furthermore, the statement by the student is a reflection of the political environment in which he/she finds him/herself. In other words, Biko is still held as an important political figure by black politically-driven students and other African people in political spheres. The statement also indicates conflicting and differing definitions of racism. Stating that African people cannot be racist, the participant portrays himself as a person who perceives racism as the tendency of the dominant group to control minority groups. Since political history links racism with white people, who had the social, political and economic power, African people were understood to be incapable of racism because they did not possess such power.

However, the participant takes on an ignorant position and fails to acknowledge that white people's power has decreased in the political arena and African people now have the political power to oppress others both from within their cultural group and outside it. It is possible that the participant reveals political discourses held by African people relating to racism as discriminating against another group for the purpose of subjugating others. Furthermore, racism is associated with apartheid, and denying racist tendencies is seen as a strategy to maintain a positive identity.

Finally the notion of "racism is the thing of the past" is built around the assumption that racism was the social ill of the apartheid era and that it does not have a place in the post apartheid society (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003).

Message 11: *“lol let me tel i am xhosaman so being raacist is your view im not at all coz im born in country where the racism is the thing of the past so using those races as the example was to show that Im not wat pipl myt think i am”*

The statement indicates that the participant believes that racism was practised during the apartheid era when power was still in the hands of the white majority. This is highlighted when the participant says *“...I’m born in the country where racism is the thing of the past”*. Now that the power is in the hands of African people, he denies the possibility that an African person can be capable of exercising racism since racism is seen as a white phenomenon. Although racism existed, some participants in an online virtual environment envisage a future which is not associated with racism as they suggest through their postings that racist attitudes and behaviour is a thing belonging to the past.

4.1.2 Mitigation

The umbrella theme of mitigation relates to codes that minimise the culpability of the individual accused of racism and the act itself (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003). In the text, the following was found:

Message 2: *“jimmy manyi is not a racist he is a idiot.we are in seventeen years of democracy and he is still labelling people according to their skincolour and is clear to me that his mind is still in the hands of the oppressor.(steve biko)”*

Instead of racism, the participant says that Jimmy Manyi *“is still labelling people according to their skin colour”*. Thus the act seen by others as racism is perceived by the participant as

merely an incident of discrimination, thus making light of the situation (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003). The participant takes the position aimed at toning down the accusations, possibly protecting African people from being judged as racist based on Jimmy Manyi's comments. However Jimmy Manyi is seen as an "*idiot*" who continues to label people according to their skin colour, a characteristic that is not expected in the current inclusive democratic South Africa. In other words, instead of discriminating against people according to their race, the participant indicates that the tendency has been displaced by "colourism" whereby people discriminate against each other based on the colour of one's skin.

In this statement "*we are in seventeen years of democracy and he is still labelling people according to their skin colour*" the participant believes that colour should not matter in how groups of people interact. Therefore, the participant takes a position that indicates his approval for those actions aimed at integrating South Africans despite one's skin colour. Again, Steve Biko's continued influence on how people view the issue of race in South Africa is brought to the fore. Through this association, the participant reveals his strong links with the influences of Steve Biko that were against the racial practises during the apartheid era. Anyone uttering comments contrary to Steve Biko's teachings are seen as "*idiots*", indirectly shaming the legacy of the late political activist by their comments.

Also seen in the example below, the participant says that "*well i don't know if his racist or not we can't be entirely sure..*". In this example, the participant took a subjective position justifying the act of racism by assuming the recipients were quick to react to Jimmy Manyi's comments. This is an indication that race relations are still fragile and are treated as a sensitive social issue within a new South Africa (Van Dijk, 1992). Therefore, the comments passed should not be mistaken for racism because people are dealing with the past discourses

of racial relations which often raise negative feelings. Possibly, the participant is projecting his own attitude towards race issues and recommends that politicians should engage in critical thinking before commenting about race issues since they are still sensitive.

Message 7: *“well i don't know if his racist or not we can't be entirely sure, but we still a young democratic country so we should try to be colour blind because race issues in south africa are still very sensitive and Manyi as a politician should have realised that thats why one needs to think before stating such statements”*,

From another point of view, stating that *“well i don't know if his racist or not we can't be entirely sure...”* the participant is not sure about the definition of racism. There is no clear understanding regarding the contemporary meaning of racism which renders it difficult to judge a person's comment as racist or not. Also, the statement is a reflection showing that the participant is abandoning the traditional view of racism and replacing it with a new discourse within racial issues that is associated with the new South Africa. Old racial discourses were associated with attitudes that discriminated African people at the expense of white people. Consistent with Bonilla-Silva (2001), the participant believes that old racial views should be replaced by covert racial discourses and practises. Therefore, according to this belief, Jimmy Manyi was supposed to adopt a racial agenda in the discussion of political matters that avoids direct racial references.

Also the participant states that *“...but we still a young democratic country so we should try to be colour blind..”*. This part of the extract might be a call by the participant that South Africa has to move beyond the point of differentiating people according to colour in order to determine access to resources. The participant's belief is exacerbated by the prevalent

assumption that socio economic success is a result of an individual's hard work, determination and too many years invested in education. Anybody who is economically advantaged is applauded for a wonderful job well done or hard work to have achieved the position that they are in. Those that are occupying a lower position economically are blamed for their position. On the other hand socio-economic inequalities are blamed on culture and class rather than institutional racism. By suggesting that people have to be colour blind, is to forget that the historical context that led to the socio-economic disparities amongst races was based and (to some large degree) continues to be based on race-relations within the country. Therefore, those that are economically underprivileged are blamed for the problems that they are facing.

4.1.3 Reversal

This theme consisted of codes that were meant to reverse racist charges. In other words, those that consistently complained of racism are seen as the real racist (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003). In this scenario, African people always complained of being victims of racism. Instead of being seen as victims of racism, African people are labelled as the real racists.

Message 6: “i will have to agree with u. segragating people according to their race just blatantly paints the image of a racist person. not only does it do that but it also takes us back in our time line”.

In the above extract, African people are always complaining of being the victims of racism since they were the majority who were segregated during the apartheid era. The participant

notes that *“i will have to agree with u. segregating people according to their race just blatantly paints the image of a racist person”*. Given the fact that the allegedly racist comments were passed by an African influential politician towards coloured people, the participant highlights that African people are not only the victims of racism but they are capable of being racist. In other words, the participant believes that anyone who has the political power has the potential of racist tendencies.

Even though political power dynamics have changed since apartheid when whites were in power, the participant sees racial practises the same. Now that African people have the political stamina, they are capable of racial discrimination like the whites did in the past. Instead of the participant taking the position of victims and sympathising, African people are seen as the real racists that attack the innocent. Further, the participant highlights the kind of society that forms part of the new South Africa where anyone is a racist by merely segregating people by their race or skin colour.

4.1.4 Negative Representations of the other

The umbrella theme of negative representations of the other consisted of codes that associated African people with negative topics.

Message 26: “Definitely not because in this beautiful rainbow nation of ours, whites can do no wrong and can never say anything wrong but a black man like Manyi makes a few comments and its headline news baby, so lets the beautiful rainbow nation that we are and all carry on like pretend to like and tolerate each other

meanwhile behind closed doors we detest each other. Is'nt S.A a beautiful country. I dare you all to reply to this comment plz”

In this extract, the participant says that *“Definitely not because in this beautiful rainbow nation of ours, whites can do no wrong and can never say anything wrong but a black man like Manyi makes a few comments and its headline news baby..”*. It is apparent that the participant did not consider the comments passed by Jimmy Manyi as racist and he or she justified the accusations by stating that African people are featured in the media only when they have done something negative.

The statement also reveals the state of the media that the participant is subjected to. It shows that, the media favours to portray white people on a positive light, that is, news report positive news about white people whilst African people make headlines when they have only done something that the public detest (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003). This negative representation of the other discourse, positions African people as people that are deviant; African people who always act in ways that deviate from the expected norms and rules.

In addition, by stating that *“so lets the beautiful rainbow nation that we are and all carry on like pretend to like and tolerate each other meanwhile behind closed doors we detest each other”*, the participant distances himself from the future identity where South Africa is seen as a rainbow nation that blends everyone together forging a non-racial era. This identity is seen as a myth which serves to cover up racial inequalities that dominate post apartheid South African as it masks white benefits accumulated during times when African people were oppressed. Instead, racism still exists but it is exercised in covert and complicated ways.

4.1.5 Naturalising Inequality and blaming the victims

Naturalising and blaming the victims is a broad theme that consists of codes that tend to focus on the differences amongst races in their socio-economic standing without considering the real causes of such inequalities (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003).

Message 21: “i dont know what it is that all of you are arguing about because really now Manyi was stating a fact...coloured people dominate W.C qha Url are so sensitive when it comes to black people making comments”.

In the above statement when the participant says that “*i don’t know what it is that all of you are arguing about because really now Manyi was stating a fact*”, he or she does not question African people and is very protective against the accusations directed at them. As long they are stating the fact, their comments are out of criticism. Furthermore, stating that “*...coloured people dominate W.C qha Url are so sensitive when it comes to black people making comments*”, the statement indicates that socio-economic inequalities are simply dismissed as the old discourses of class politics. In other terms, the participant agrees that coloured people are the majority in Western Cape and those who do not agree with it are perceived as being sensitive to the fact stated.

At the same time, the participant is positioning coloured population in the Western Cape as people who need to be entrepreneurs responsible for their conditions. Socio-economic inequalities cease to be perceived as products of apartheid; instead people are held responsible for those inequalities and are blamed for self exploitation. Consistent with Doane (cited in, Doane, 2006), such political discourses aim to minimise the extent of inequalities

and blame subordinate groups for such conditions. On the other hand, this political discourse shows that the laws enacted to deal with the structural differences of the past are very ineffective and are concentrated on certain areas while neglecting other areas.

4.1.6 Insecurity

Participants perceive the use of English as a medium of communication a threat to their security and identity. This kind of talk was identified as the insecurity repertoire. It encompassed three resources: “denying their identity”, “undermining their mother language”, and “feeling inferior”. “Denying their identity” resource highlights that the excessive use of English by other African fellow students symbolises abandoning their identity. The following extract provides an example of this resource:

Message 58: “A A guys those r the Micheal Jacksons of 2moro, th nxt thng u knw they'll be bleachng their faces so that they can b white. Even though they might speak English with accent,they wr born blk, they'll always b blk no matter what because being blk is deep under their skin so they have to stop stressing themselves”

Based on the above statement, when the participant says “*Even though they might speak English with accent, they wr born blk, they'll always b blk no matter what because being blk is deep under their skin so they have to stop stressing themselves*”, the participant perceives the ability to converse in vernacular as a characteristic of African people’s identity. Therefore, code switching constantly to English is perceived as a sign of abandoning ones identity in favour of English. Infact, the participant shows the pride of upholding one’s

identity. Consistent with other author (Bucholtz, 1999), those who speak one language, that is, their mother language hold strongly to their language and distance themselves from other languages by assigning negative identity to those who can speak other languages other than their mother language. Hence bilingual African people heard speaking English are assumed to be denying their identity.

When bilingual African students are perceived to be denying their identity by speaking English, the monolingual participant gains the power to misinterpret the identity of bilingual participants. For instance when the participant says “*A A guys those r the Micheal Jacksons of 2moro, th nxt thng u knw they'll be bleachng their faces so that they can b white..*”, he or she is assigning a contradicting identity to the bilingual African students which is not congruent to their intentions or preferred identity. As such bilingual participants are perceived to be in desperate need to change their skin colour and accent to be identified with white people. In agreement, (Spolsky, 1999), claims that bilingual speaker adopting the identity of other communities alter the content and register of their language whilst assuming the positive identity practises of that group.

From another point of view, when the participant says “*...Even though they might speak English with accent, they wr born blk, they'll always b blk no matter what because being blk is deep under their skin so they have to stop stressing themselves*”, he or she is advocating for a uniform identity whilst perpetuating the idea that English should be deemed inferior and should not be spoken more frequently as compared to the mother language. This is an effort directed towards controlling the homogenising process and maintaining power. This process is worsened by the fears that Xhosa language will be eroded if more Xhosa people continue speaking English at the expense of their mother language.

Mentioning that “A A guys those r the Micheal Jacksons of 2moro, th nxt thng u knw they'll be bleachng their faces so that they can b white “, the participant assumes that African people who speak English at the expense of their mother language want to be recognised through adopting white man’s standards. In other terms, white man’s standards are seen as the standards that measure how human the person is. This line of thinking is indicative of the great influences of Black consciousness movement that was under the strong leadership of Steve Biko. It raised the possibility that African people take on the identity of white people and use it as a tool for recognition.

Viewing this statement from another angle, an African student speaking English is understood in terms of the Michael Jacksons of tomorrow and bleaching faces metaphor. This metaphor provides a meaning to understand and present African students preferring to converse in English at the expense of their vernacular. Therefore, the metaphor presented the participant with an opportunity to position their experiences based on the meanings attached to the metaphors. It is also possible that students who were critical of other African students who preferred to speak in English were feeling insecure. Probably they attended poorly equipped township schools characterised by minimum use of English compared to those who attended schools that were initially designed for English students. As a result, they entered University with limited English speaking skills and used an African accent that is valued to represent African ethnicity. At the same time, they failed to articulate and express their ideas in English which exacerbated their feelings of insecurity.

Also seen in the above statement, the “feeling inferior repertoire” is utilised and highlights that the participant perceives fellow African students as feeling inferior when they are

conversing in their mother language. This might be explained by the assumption that African people perceive English as superior language associated with a lucrative status. Anyone heard speaking in English is held at high esteem. Therefore, African people prefer to speak English since it is a language that puts them in a superior position and relegates those who stick to their vernacular to an inferior position. In this instance, the participant creates a sense of “them versus us”. English people are represented by the “them” speech code associated with a wealth status and a privileged position leaving African people dealing with feelings of inferiority associated with the “us” speech code.

The participant wrote this reflection in Xhosa, which further exacerbated the differences between those who speak Xhosa from those who do not speak Xhosa. Even though African people have political power, the more Xhosa people use English, the more it is seen as a way of increasing the power of white people, yet on the other hand threatening the status quo of Xhosa people. The concern is on the downward shifting of the Xhosa status. Since English is more prized than Xhosa, the fear is that Xhosa language will be silenced. Therefore, to gain that power back, Xhosa language should be used more frequently than English so that the language does not become extinct. When the participant says “*I rather say they are not happy with their mother language*”, he or she is attempting to show that African people speak English as a way *of* dealing with feelings of inferiority, hoping to achieve a better status by communicating in English with their fellow mates whom they share the same mother language.

The “undermining their mother language” resource maintains, that those who prefer to use English compared to their mother language are seen to be undermining their mother language and forgetting their culture. This is strongly supported when the participant asserts that “*You*

know what Babe English is a universal language, but I think Africans see their languages as not that important, however I find it hard to understand..”.

Message 59: “You know what Babe English is a universal language, but I think Africans see their languages as not that important, however I find it hard to understand. I rather say they are not happy with their mother language”

Also in the above extract, the participant takes on a position aimed towards maintaining and preserving their ethnic identities through connecting to their mother language and roots. However, African students who use English excessively are assigned a position that rejects their cultural identity. In other words, speaking Xhosa is used as a tool linked to ethnic identity and encompasses cultural, personal and social identity. Therefore, if a person prefers to code switch it means that they are not only rejecting their ethnic identity but reject their personal, cultural and social identity (Gibson, 2004).

Viewing it from another angle, when the participant says *“English is a universal language, but i think Africans see their language as not that important”*, the participants is struggling to understand the policy of multilingualism of the new South Africa that recognises 11 official languages. The policy holds all eleven official languages in South Africa at the same esteem, but English happens to be used more often in various places than other languages. On the same note, English is seen as occupying an elevated status as the language used extensively in different sectors (Bangeni & Kapp, 2007). It is a preferred language for medium of communication. Even so, the participant supports the language rights whilst silently emphasising the use of native language.

4.1.7 Class Division

Even though participants posted discussions that were written in English, their statements showed that African people do not share a unified identity. As such “Class Division” repertoire was identified which encompassed the following resources: “English is seen as a tool to further divide the blacks”, and “coconuts”. The first resource points to the fact that African people might be placed in one category as African, however, in reality, they are divided into two categories, namely those who speak vernacular and those who always speak English. For example the participant says *“Ja i might agree with u coz most of us are only black on the outside but on the inside they are white 'coconuts...’*. Those who prefer to converse in English with their fellow African mates are labelled as coconuts. They no longer belong to the group of African people who stick to their identity. They are put in another category of African people, in this case coconut group. In this case, coconuts is a term used to refer to African people who live like white people by adopting white people’s ways of living or conducting themselves. This kind of talk was labelled as the “coconuts” resource.

Message 59: “Ja i might agree with u coz most of us are only black on the out side but on the inside they are white 'coconuts' so thats why they wanna b known for outclassing whites in speaking English”.

Ironically, the participant perceives those who prefer English over their mother language as coconuts and includes himself in that identity. By saying, *“Ja i might agree with u coz most of us are only black on the outside ..”*, it is possible that there is an increased amount of African people who likes to speak English with their fellow mates at the expense of their mother language.

Those who prefer using English over their native Xhosa language are seen as deviant, abnormal and are immediately seen as belonging to the other group of coconuts. In other words showing linguistic diversity is perceived as outside the norm. As a result of this inequality, the participant quickly assumes that there is a desired inside and undesired outside identity. Speaking Xhosa with other Xhosa speaking African people becomes a desired identity whilst those who speak English with other students whom they share Xhosa language belong to an undesired outside identity. Therefore, those rejecting their Xhosa language, norms and values are being spiteful. Therefore in order for them to be seen as true Xhosa, they should use their native language since sameness of language denotes sameness of thoughts, sentiments and identity.

The above discussion posting illustrates the myths that are held by the participant. As seen in the above paragraph, the excessive use of English by African people when speaking with other African people whom they share the same language leads to two groups of African people. The participant believes that the use of one's native language rather than English will lead to positive and harmonious race relations amongst Xhosa. Hence, those who prefer to use English are possibly perceived to be disruptive and distracting harmonious relations amongst Xhosa people. On the other hand they are seen as, rude, vulgar and selfish in their endeavour to outclass white people in the way in which they speak English. Furthermore, they are willingly and engaged in behaviours that are dangerous and unhealthy. These unhealthy behaviours include "outclassing whites in speaking English".

4.1.8 Conditions for acquiring a new language

Repertoire “Conditions for Acquiring a new Language” speaks specifically to the factors that lead an individual to be attracted to learn another language apart from their mother language. The resources taped by the speakers within this repertoire involved “exposure”, and “personal choice”. In the personal choice resource, the participant mentions that “...*pple shld b multi lingual if they want*”. In this example, the use of English by their fellow African mates is perceived as purely a matter of choice. Everyone have a choice to learn any language they are attracted to and it is within their rights to do so. This is indicated in the following extract:

Message 57: “*yaaa.lets nt judge each other guys....pple shld b multi lingual if they want*”.

The above statement, the participant notes that “*yaaa.lets nt judge each other guys...*”, which shows that the participant is not critical towards African fellow mates who speak in English. The main motivating factor may be that the participant might have realised that these students were exposed to an environment that required them to speak in English. In other words, they might have schooled in a multicultural and multi lingual environment where English was constantly used. Maybe some of these students are from multiracial marriages. As such, they had no choice but to learn to converse in English. Since they speak English more frequently than their mother language with other African students, they are labelled as “multies”. Multies becomes an identity assigned to those African students who speak more than one language.

It is possible that those African students who prefer to converse in their mother language and pass judgement on multilingual students are probably experiencing difficulty in speaking English. Even if they manage to speak English, they fail to express themselves clearly by using incorrect grammatically constructed sentences. As a result, their identities are not properly represented. Therefore, they rely on their mother language as it is a quicker and an effective way of communication. Also, their identities are well represented when using their mother language.

In the extract below, the participant maintains that “*Well It depends, who are we to judge. I mean if they are cool with, let them talk*”. As such the participant portrays him or herself as a non judgemental person who considers all the possible factors before passing a value judgement on other people. Above that, he views himself not having the write to judge other people and possible believe that no one is supposed to judge other African students based on their language preference.

Message 56: “*Well It depends, who are we to judge. I mean if they are cool with, let them talk. maybe they are exposed or used to speaking English. As long as can hear you speaking your Xhosa, my love*”.

In addition, the participant does not judge people’s identity based on their ability to speak Xhosa or English. It might be possible that the participant views identity as a diverse concept. In this case, someone might be Xhosa and not speak the language. Instead they might use English as a mode of communication and depend on other symbolic representations of the language for identity (Gibson, 2004).

Consistent with the other research, (De Kadt, 1994), the above statement also indicates that the speaker is content with African students who prefer to speak English because he/she is very clear about the need to learn English, and it is not a matter of liking or not liking English. He might be aware that speaking English has advantages in improving conversations amongst people. People might speak the same vernacular. However it is easy to misconstrue the communication especially considering that other African students grew up in environments when they hardly speak their vernacular. As a result, they might not understand fully, a conversation in their vernacular. Therefore, the use of English by people who share the same mother language makes it easier for people to understand each other in a conversation.

4.1.9 Acts of identity

The criticism directed to African students' is their constant use of English which indicates that the critiques are influenced by the common discourse that points out that African people use English frequently and are imitating or trying hard to identify with white people. In agreement, Page, Robert and Tabouret-Keller (1985), maintains that individuals invent systems of verbal behaviour so as to resemble that of the group which he or she wishes to be identified with. Therefore, they are assigned a superior position since English is associated with a superior status. With such acts of identity, they advance their social advantage.

On the other hand, the participant that was critical of African students who prefer to speak English maintained that *"it is a way 2b recognised by piple"*. As such, the participant assumes that these students use English as a tool to be recognised. This resource is drawn from the discourses emanating from daily talk amongst African people maintaining that other African

people prefer to use English even in situations that do not warrant conversing in English mainly motivated by the need to be recognised. In those situations, a person is seen at a better position compared to those that converse in their vernacular, as seen in the following extract.

Message 55: "i wold say mayb by speaking 4rghn lnguag makes people to thnk tht thy r bter /it is a wy 2b recognised by piple".

4.2 Conclusion

The analysis of the findings highlighted that participants drew on a number of discursive strategies to negotiate and maintain their identity in an online virtual environment. These discursive strategies were consistent with the discursive strategies found in existing literature about the discursive strategies that are used in media to report about the racial issues.

These discursive strategies included denial, mitigation, reversal, negative representations of the other, naturalising inequality and blaming the victims. Even though they were used in the media, same discursive strategies were used by the participants as the media informs and influences people's every day talk about contemporary issues such as racial issues. Each of these discursive strategies has sub-themes as illustrated in the above inserted table.

As participants engaged in the discussion postings, they took up positions and assigned positions to other participants. In these discussion postings, participants also utilised interpretive repertoires as well as linguistic resources that are usually created, negotiated and shared by people in conversations around certain topics. Specifically, participants utilised insecurity, class division, conditions of acquiring new language and acts of identity linguistic

resources in conversation about African people who prefer to converse in English with other African people whom they share same mother language with.

Furthermore, political discourses played a greater influence in the way in which participants responded on the topics that were posted. Therefore, people use a variety of discursive strategies to negotiate and maintain their identity in an anonymous online environment.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

People using the online virtual environment, “blackboard”, use a variety of discursive strategies to negotiate and maintain their identity in an anonymous online virtual environment. This chapter re-highlights the main findings of the analysis with the aim of pointing out the discursive strategies and discourses that were utilised by participants in their discussion postings to negotiate and maintain their identity online. The latter segment of this chapter details the value and limitations of this research and recommendations are also included.

5.2 Main Findings

The analysis has demonstrated that people online use a variety of discursive strategies to negotiate and maintain their identity in an anonymous online virtual environment. These discursive strategies were also documented in the literature (De la Rey & Duncan, 2003; Van Dijk, 1992), which details discursive strategies that are used in media to report on issues related to racial matters. Media has played a major role and has become an integral part in people's everyday life and the way in which people discuss contemporary and important issues. As such, these discursive strategies were utilised by the participants in their discussion postings about race topics.

There were five discursive strategies that were utilised by participants to negotiate and maintain their identity in an anonymous virtual environment. These were denial, mitigation, reversal, negative representations of the other, naturalising inequality, and blaming the victims. Within the denial strategy, there were three resources identified, that is issues related to “moral blackmail”, “not-racist” and, “racism is the thing of the past” as these relate to past

and present thinking of participants. The researcher identified that these aspects were important to discuss in relation to online participant postings in order to highlight that aspects of race continue to be relevant for people in the university setting. Therefore the researcher found it important to understand the race relations between students in an online setting in order to address wider racism issues within South Africa. Embedded within the “mitigation strategy”, or one of the discursive strategies used by participants, the researcher found it important to highlight four aspects in relation to this strategy. Namely, “discrimination”, “downplaying”, “euphemism” and “race relations”, were found to be behavioural aspects used discursively to shape one’s identity, although these were found to be fragile and fractured and very much dependent on the context of what was presented during an online discussion. Often these strategies used variations of linguistic manipulation to discriminate, downplay, euphemism or comment on race related issues. In many ways, participants made light of the act of being racist but were capable of attacking those online who were thought to be making more overt racist comments. For instance, participants posted online attacks to those believed to be openly racist, but in doing so participants also displayed their own racial biases.

Within the reversal strategy,” real racist”, and “reverse accusations” were linguistic resources that were also utilised by the participants. Using this strategy and its associated linguistic resources, African people were perceived to be the real racists rather than being the victims of racism all the time. The situation is worsened by the fact that African people have gained political power which puts them in a position to exercise racism on minority groups.

Negative representations of the other encompassed associating African people with negative topics. Participants did not perceive the act of racism as racism. Instead, African people are

featured on the news when they have done something that is not liked by the public. As a result, they are seen to be deviant people or their actions get to be misconstrued. The other discursive strategy that was utilised by participants was naturalising inequality and blaming the victims. Within this strategy, participant made use of focus on racialised patterns of socio-economic inequality and ignoring the real cause of such inequality resource. Participants dismissed the accusations of racism and agreed that colored people are the majority in the Western Cape. As such, the comments that were perceived to be racist were taken as the fact by the participants. In so doing, the participants focused on the socio-economic disparities among different races and ignored the real causes of such differences.

Within the discussion postings, participants took up positions at the same time assigning positions to other participants. As soon as participants took up a position, they immediately perceived the racist accusations from the view point of that position. Those who took up positions assigned to them agreed with the view point of the participant who assigned them a position. However other participants challenged the positions they were given by other participants. As a result they repositioned themselves and maintained their differing view point on the racial issue being discussed online.

The other topic that was posted and which was of interest to those using blackboard was the topic of whether or not African people preferred to speak English with other African people whom they share their mother language, or whether or not they prefer to speak Xhosa. The analysis of the discussion revealed that participants often displayed discursive strategies such as “insecurity”, “class division”, or portrayed “conditions of acquiring new language” and “acts of identity” interpretive repertoires. Each of these interpretive repertoires were

imbedded with linguistic resources. They were used by the participants to negotiate and maintain their identity in an online anonymous virtual environment.

“Insecurity” repertoire encompassed the “denying their identity”, “feeling inferior”, and “undermining their mother language linguistic resource”. Participants assumed that African people who prefer to speak with the fellow mates in English were not happy with their mother language. Therefore preference to speak English rather than their vernacular was equated with denying their identity. At the same time speaking vernacular made them to feel inferior which often led to tendencies of undermining their mother language. The “class division” repertoire encompassed “coconuts” and “English is seen as a tool to further divide blackness” resources. The analysis discovered that the preference to speak English with other African people who speak the same mother language divides African people. In other words, African people are divided into those who prefer to speak English and those who prefer to converse in their mother language. In addition African people who prefer to speak English more frequently than their mother language are assigned a coconut identity by others on blackboard.

“Conditions of acquiring new language” repertoire was associated with “exposure” and personal choice” linguistic resource. This repertoire was built around the idea that African people who frequently speak English made a choice. Specifically, they chose to learn to speak English and they should not be judged for making that choice. Furthermore, they were exposed to an environment that forced them to learn English. Probably they schooled in an environment which allowed English as a medium of communication or they are from mixed race marriages.

“Acts of identity” repertoire was associated with English being seen as symbolising superiority. Speaking English is equated with being white in a “tool for recognition” linguistic resources. Participants who used these resources assumed that African students prefer to speak English because they want to be associated with a privileged status attached to the use of English. By using English, they are seen to be superior than those who don’t speak English. Furthermore African people who speak English with each other than their mother language are easy to be recognised in public than those who speak vernacular. Therefore African people speak English rather than their mother language so that they can be recognised by other people. Since English is originally a language for white people, African people decides to speak English becomes they want to assume a white identity.

Apart from the discursive strategies that were identified, participants also used political discourses that informed their talk surrounding racial issues and the preferred use of English by African people. These political discourses were perpetuated by the prominent political figures' such as Steve Biko. These discourses were used to negotiate and maintain identity in an online anonymous virtual environment.

5.3 Value

Participants used interpretive repertoires located within their everyday talk. Findings highlighted the discursive strategies used by the media to report news about accusations of racism. Participants used these strategies to negotiate and maintain their identity on line. However, previous scholars have investigated discursive strategies used by then dominant and political white people to report incidences of racism. These discursive strategies were used to negotiate and maintain identity in an anonymous virtual environment. However, there is scant literature, on the use of the strategies by African people to report incidences of racism

in the media since political power shifted hands when inclusive democratic government was introduced in 1994. Therefore, the research will expand on the existing literature on how African people negotiate and maintain identity in an anonymous online environment when they engage in online conversations about racism.

5.4 Limitations and Recommendations

The data for the research was gathered from discussion postings of second year psychology students. Therefore, the analysis of this research focused on the discursive strategies that were used by the second year psychology students and excluded students from other departments and educational levels. Only the discussion postings of second year psychology students were considered. As such further research should consider using a sample that will be inclusive of the discussion postings of students from all departments and educational levels in exploring how people negotiate and maintain their identity in an anonymous online virtual environment.

The researcher lost track of the university time schedules. As a result, most of the students went away for the vacation which meant that few students responded to the few topics that were posted on Blackboard. To deal with the limitation, discussion postings were also taken from general topics that were not posted by the researcher. However, these topics were consistent with the aims of the research.

5.5 Conclusion

This research found that when people participate in the virtual environments there is a great need to portray oneself properly and with some accuracy as it relates to one's concept of self and identity; one's identity is therefore important to establish to others in a virtual

environment. What was also found was a noticeably strong attempt by participants in the study to communicate one's racial identity. This was found to be important to establish because the race-relations in South African often require citizens to cultural and socially identify with their race. This was found to be equally important in communicating one's point of view online. In normal university settings, this point of view can be made quickly by a face to face meeting, where one's racial identity can be ascertained through interacting in person. In contrast, the virtual reality often means that people have to establish their racial identities in order to make known where one stands on the socio-political and economic issues in South Africa. Discussions and debates within South Africa continue to be grounded in histories of race relations and as it relates to who maintains and holds power. Basic representations of one's identity as it was found to be related to the online discussions on "blackboard" has to be understand in relation to the wider racial dynamics of power and privilege within South Africa; online identity therefore displays aspects of identifying with one's peers in relation to race and as displayed on one's virtual profile. For many people, virtual displays carry varying degrees of importance in the sense that some personal information is perceived as an accurate representation of the "real" person. However, some people online employ more advanced strategies to negotiate their identities. These different discursive strategies largely influenced the way participants were found to be perceived by others online. Many discourse analysts whom have focused on research related to one's internet identity have concluded that online identities became an extension of reality. This quite possibly makes one's online identity a continuation of one's real life identity; this research has identified that online users employ more advanced discursive strategies to negotiate their identity in any online virtual environment.

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Appendix A

Notice

<p>Blackboard is a teaching and learning tool. From time to time the Department will use information uploaded to this site for research purposes. In such instances all identifying information is changed or omitted such that your identity is kept confidential. By using blackboard you consent to these provisions. All queries pertaining to this should be addressed to Jacqui Marx.</p>
