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Constructing academic identities online: Identity performance in research group blogs written by multilingual scholars



María-José Luzón

Department of English and German Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Zaragoza, 50009, Zaragoza, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Blogs provide an open space for research groups to publicise their research and activities, become more visible both to the local and international disciplinary communities, and conduct self-promotion. Research groups harness the affordances of the medium to weave a narrative about the group, presented through various modalities, and thus construct their online identity. The purpose of this research is to analyse how identity is constructed in research group blogs written in English by groups affiliated to Spanish institutions. In this study I address the following questions: (i) which are the facets of the group's identities created by multilingual scholars in research group blogs?; (ii) which textual and multimodal practices are adopted by researchers to construct the group's identity? To answer these questions I conducted a content analysis (focusing on written language, visuals, hyperlinks) of posts taken from 12 research group blogs. The study provides insight on how these research groups mesh different semiotic modes in their blogs to project a multifaceted identity and reveals that blogging may be a powerful instrument for research groups' identity performance and visibility.

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1. Introduction

Digital technologies, and the immediacy, visibility, and connectedness they imply, have changed the way we communicate and present ourselves. Social media offer new opportunities for self-presentation, impression management, self-promotion and identity performance (Barton & Lee, 2013; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In the academic context, there has also been a shift in the ways in which scholars present themselves publicly: they are increasingly turning to online spaces (e.g., faculty webpages, social networking sites, academic blogs) to create an online persona, develop professional identities, and claim their place within their disciplinary community and even outside academia (Barbour & Marshall, 2012; Davies & Merchant, 2007; Hess, 2002; Hyland, 2011b, 2012; Kirkup, 2010; Lovasz-Bukvova, 2011; Matsuda, 2002; Sokół, 2012; Thoms & Thelwall, 2005).

The question of identity construction in academic discourse has attracted much attention (for a comprehensive review of identity in academic discourse, see Flowerdew & Wang, 2015), but there is still little research on how identities are constructed in academic digital genres. One of the digital genres that has recently been the focus of increasing interest as a venue for the construction of scholarly identity is the blog (Davies & Merchant, 2007; Dennen, 2009; Ewins, 2005;

E-mail address: mjluzon@unizar.es.

Graupner, 2010; Kirkup, 2010). Blogs represent a new mode of academic discourse used by scholars to share self-presentation content, and thus construct their online identity. Blogging scholars develop their identity by putting together a compilation of posts, which enables an ongoing and iterative process of subject positioning and facilitates the blending of different facets of scholars' personal and professional identity (Dennen, 2009; Graupner, 2010). Despite the interest in identity development in academic blogs, to the best of my knowledge, there are few studies on blogs written by research groups for self-presentation (see Luzón, 2017) and no studies on the various semiotic resources drawn upon by these groups to construct their identity in these digital spaces. However, in many disciplinary domains research groups are the primary organizational unit in the process of knowledge creation (Becher, 1989), and they are becoming an increasingly important mode of academic work even in disciplines where research was traditionally conducted individually (Vabø, Alvsvåg, Kyvik, & Reymert, 2016), which calls for research on how groups manage discursive spaces for identity construction. When defining and developing their research and communication agendas, Spanish research groups need to consider the *Spanish Strategy for Science and Technology and Innovation (2012)* (henceforth *Spanish Strategy*), which establishes the general objectives and priority lines of action to develop R&D activities in Spain during 2013–2020. This *Strategy* determines that the allocation of public resources should be guided by the quality of research and its social and international impact; it also establishes the promotion of knowledge transfer in open collaboration environments, the support for the internationalisation of research and the increase of scientific culture in Spanish society as priority lines. In order to attract collaboration, have an impact both within their discipline and beyond academia, gain support for their research activity, and obtain research resources and funding, groups need to achieve visibility and project credible academic identities. Since blogs are platforms where these groups can create networks, construct identities, and enhance their reputation and status in different communities, there is a need for research into effective group identity construction and reputation-accruing strategies in this digital mode.

The purpose of this research is to analyse how Spanish research groups represent themselves in their blogs and to study the set of semiotic resources used in these blogs to construct and project the groups' academic identity. I will address the following research questions: (i) which are the facets of the group's identities created by multilingual scholars in research group blogs? (ii) which text-based and multimodal practices are adopted by researchers to construct the groups' identities? The study can reveal the semiotic resources drawn upon by research groups when engaging in the process of online identity development, and thus help those groups that intend to use blogs (or similar digital platforms) to promote different aspects of their identities to better understand which resources can be useful for this purpose.

2. Theoretical background: identity construction in online and academic discourse

Contemporary research conceives identity as a socially and discursively constructed phenomenon, which develops through participation in specific social practices and communities. Identity is seen as multiple, dynamic (i.e. continuously redefined over time and space), and relational (i.e. constructed, negotiated and interpreted in social interaction) (Block, 2007; De Fina et al., 2006; Flowerdew & Wang, 2015; Ivanič, 1998). In this paper, I draw mainly on theories of identity performance (Goffman, 1959) and identity positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990), since the combinations of both approaches help to explain identity construction in academic blogs: academic bloggers perform in front of diversified audiences in order to position themselves as members of particular communities.

The issue of identity construction has been explored widely both in online discourse and in academic discourse. As this study focuses on academic blogging, research in these two areas will be useful to frame it.

2.1. Online identity

Most research on self-presentation online draws on Goffman's idea of identity as performance. Goffman (1959) considers that in everyday situations we enact performances for specific audiences, trying to project a credible image: through performance individuals endeavour to construct identities that are consistent with audience(s)' expectations. Researchers emphasise the social and multifaceted nature of online identity (Barton & Lee, 2013; Lee & Barton, 2011; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008): participants in online interactions are networked individuals, members of different communities connected to each other, performing for different audiences and in varying contexts. Therefore, the information they select to disclose and show, and the impression management strategies to do it, will depend on the context and the audience, which may lead to a multiplicity of selves. Scholars have also stressed that online identity is fluid and increasingly more intertwined with offline identity, the performance of identity in online communities reflecting individuals' face-to-face reality and being affected by their offline social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Chen, 2013).

Research addressing identity in digital media has explored the affordances of these media for identity construction and the self-presentation strategies performed in these media (Androutsopoulos, 2013; Bolander & Locher, 2010; Chen, 2013; Dennen, 2009; Lee & Barton, 2011; Schreiber, 2015). These studies have revealed that writers use a range of semiotic resources (e.g., visual, audio, interactive resources) to position themselves and create their online identity (Hevern, 2004;

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