Voice in online social relations

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Abstract

Voice is an important component of discourse that provides insights into the social relations and interactions of participants in online contexts. Voice is conceptualised in this study as human communication through a range of actions that include speaking, writing and sharing, components of discourse used when interacting with others in mediated spaces and within a broader context of public relations practice. While considerable attention in communication scholarship is focused on voice, as an important form of social capital, minimal attention is paid to voice within social media. Participants' tone of voice and social languages are instrumental in conveying online identities to others and in helping participants to assess who they choose to interact with online. This research investigated the online participant voices within an Australian Government campaign about binge drinking. This study investigated voice as one of the cues used by participants in conveying identities to others with whom they chose to socialise online. Discourse analysis was used to explore the participant voices within the campaign and how voice proved instrumental in establishing and maintaining social connections in virtual contexts. The study shows that voice has multiple functions online: giving life to our social interactions, informing our preferencing decisions and facilitating our social connectedness to others. An understanding voice, as one component of online discourse, is important for understanding the preferencing decisions of participants in determining who they connect with online around relevant social issues.

Keywords: discourse; online relations; social media; voice

Introduction

At the very heart of many of the most important human art forms is the voice (Turner, 2010). It is central to speech, poetry, drama, storytelling and song. Voice has several functions in human communication beyond the transmission and sharing of content. It gives life to our interactions with others through myriad forms, from face-to-face interactions to asynchronous communication in online spaces. Within the process of vocalisation, the mind and emotions of the individual are inseparable from the voice. Voice encapsulates an individual's sociological origins, the habits acquired from their personal lived experiences. How and where a person was raised is reflected within the sound spectrum of their native language and is evident in the way they use their voice (Turner, 2010).

Socialising online often imitates, but cannot replicate, the intimacy of a human-to-human exchange with others. Voice is an important part of online discourse as it is one of the ways to convey thoughts, experiences and feelings to others, albeit within a mediated context. In contemporary society, where both communication and interaction are profoundly mediated, each 'voice' represents a person, regardless of whether they are speaking for themselves, for their organisation or for an online community (Theunissen, 2015, p. 10). In this study, voice represents human communication through a range of actions that take place online, including speaking, writing and sharing images as components of discourse and representing social interaction that takes place online (Macnamara, 2013). Online voice is instrumental in facilitating social interactions and conveying opinions, thoughts and feelings to others, as in a conversation with a friend offline.

As part of our social interactions online, voice facilitates our social connectedness to others. Considerable attention in communication scholarship is focused on voice, which is agreed to be an important form of social capital and necessary for social equity, although few studies explore voice in online contexts (Couldry, 2008). Voice is explored within this nested case study through a sociological lens, as part of the online discourse of participants engaging with the issue of binge drinking. When individuals experience a lack or loss of voice, both online and offline, a number of scholars point to an increase in social, cultural and political problems as a result (Macnamara, 2013). The voice of these participants is analysed as one part of their online discourse to uncover insights into the identities they construct and enact through the social languages they employ online. The aim in exploring voice is to gain insights into its role in influencing the preferencing decisions of the participants as well as how voice informs the decisions of who we interact with online. Appreciating the enacting properties of voice, in particular its capability in building social identities recognisable to others, helps us to understand how connections are formed and terminated online. The significance of the study lies in understanding the concept of voice within social interactions in mediated spaces, and in exploring the role voice may play in facilitating our social connectedness to others online.

Voice provides insights into the social habits of those who choose to participate socially online. Voice facilitates connecting with others in ways that give situated meaning to the language within a particular context, such as this online campaign. Social languages, coupled with the semiotic content of posts, convey socially recognisable identities that attract some while repelling others. Social media magnify individualised voices within social exchanges online, amplifying some while quietening others (Theunissen, 2015). Finding a voice that resonates with others is instrumental to forming connections, where such connections offer the potential for developing the interaction beyond the initial exchange to something more like dialogue where opportunities to extend the interaction exist. The mediated context permanently alters the nature of voice within the social exchanges that take place. The mediated interaction and subsequently the online voice are less personal, thereby affording participants a sense of confidence, resulting in their voice becoming bolder, braver, and more forthright and embellished compared with offline. Such confidence encourages participants to over-share information that is potentially exaggerated and/or

inaccurate, making assessing the veracity of shared information more difficult (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). If voice is an important part of an individual's participation and social debate as part of the process of building social capital, then it is important to understand its role in a number of contexts, including online.

This nested case study investigates the online participant voices within an Australian Government campaign about the prominent societal issue of binge drinking among youth. This study suggests voice plays an important part in the preferencing decisions of participants, influencing who they choose to interact with socially online. In particular, this study examined the socially constructed identities developed through voice that are appealing or repelling to others. Gee's (2014) approach to discourse analysis highlights the role voice plays in conveying meaning within the interactions of participants in a community and the identities that emerge, thrive and disappear through interactions between the participants.

Defining voice and discourse

Most commonly, voice is understood as the 'sound of a person speaking' that can equate to an individual expressing an opinion on a particular topic or issue (Couldry, 2010, p. 1). Voice, however is much more than the audible articulation of words; historical interpretations of voice reveal its complexity. The father of the French revolution, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1913), challenged the revelationist voice of God, which was the dominant discourse at the time, advocating instead for the 'voice of the people' destabilising the exclusivity of the revelationist approach. In the nineteenth century, voice was discussed in the context of the emergence of the state as the public sphere, with the notion of 'collective voice' and a means of monitoring the sentiment of a given population proposed (Baker, 1999). Critical scholars have observed that all human beings have the capacity for one, and sometimes multiples voices, but that not all of those voices are heard equally (Giddens, 1991).

In the twentieth century, the concept of voice was discussed in terms of the power attributed to those who had a voice and how dominant voices monopolised the construction of knowledge across a multitude of disciplinary areas (Baker, 1999). More recent investigations of voice point out that voice and listening are inextricably intertwined, with Craig (2006, p. 39) observing that effective communication must include 'speaking and listening', leading to an outcome of mutual recognition. Developing this line of investigation, Couldry (2010, p. 580) proposes that voice is 'implicitly linked practices of speaking and listening', observing that it comprises two distinct levels: voice as process and voice as value. The first level is self-evident, but the second warrants further discussion. Couldry's (2010) second level of voice describes the act of valuing, prefacing the frameworks within contemporary society that allow us to organise ourselves as humans and that put value on, instead of undermining, voice. Within this level, Couldry (2010) describes voice as an interconnected process, inseparable from listening, and an integral part of discourse; it involves how we communicate and connect with each other interpersonally as well as in mediated contexts. It is this meaning of voice that is assumed in this study, where voice is embodied in the process of mutually recognising interactions between human beings as

reflexive agents, each with an account to give and to be heard, in a context where narratives are entangled as part of the social shared with others.

Having a voice suggests that someone has to be listening. In her work on listening in social media contexts, Crawford (2009) suggests that listening is a productive way to analyse various forms of online engagement by capturing some of the characteristics within the ongoing process of receptivity in interactions that occur online. The social interactions that take place online necessitate the development of new norms, habits and conventions to facilitate and understand those interactions. Macnamara (2014) argues that voice must include listening for it to constitute interaction, communication and dialogue; often it does not, so it is simply speaking.

Online discourse comprises the sum of the communicative interactions that happen between those who participate online. It encompasses the text, voice, conversations, images, videos and semiotic content created and shared among participants that make online interactions meaningful for others (Gee, 2014). Meanings emerge as participants apply assumptions in interpreting the discourse and in assessing the behaviour of others, and recognising identities formed by *what* information is communicated as well as *how* it is communicated. Parker (1992) describes discourse as an active rather than passive phenomenon, actively describing the social opinions, behaviours and interactions of those players online. While language is a major element of discourse, discourse is more than language alone, because it is instrumental in constituting or producing a particular view of social reality (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Further, discourse describes ways of combining and integrating language understood inherently by others through actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing and using systems, tools and objects in enacting social identities (Gee, 2014).

Blommaert (2005) describes the nature of discourse as transformative, having the ability to alter the context in which it takes place from a social and cultural context to a communicative one. For social researchers, examining discourse is imperative in exposing the constructed reality experienced by the participants around social issues like binge drinking, as such discussions are the starting point for rich debates that offer potential for ongoing discussion, potentially leading to societal changes (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001). Revisiting Couldry's (2010) definition of voice as an integral part of discourse, discussed earlier in this article, we cannot explore voice without examining the wider discourse that surrounds and contextualises it. This research explores the online voice and discourse of those who inhabit a particular community online as a contemporary exemplar of one type of a new form of social interaction. Voice is examined within a sociological lens, as part of a social discourse that describes and explains to others something about aspects of our lives as human beings and how, within contemporary society, we share that with others.

The sociality of voice in online spaces is described in the literature as performing a bridging function, through the expansion of social cues, bringing online interaction closer to the presumed gold standard of face-to-face communication (Williams, Caplan & Xiong, 2007). Lovink (2004) describes the 'the techno-utopianism storm' of the 1990s that was responsible for a glorification of 'voice' as the prime form of

participation for those who chose in inhabit online communities, suggesting it had become the prerequisite of being online (Lovink, 2004, p. 113). Jenkins and Thorburn (2003, p. 2) argue the democratic properties associated with being online remain 'politically important because they expand the range of voices that can be heard', ensuring that 'no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority'. Online participation, suggests Crawford (2009, p. 526) has tended to be conflated with contributing a voice. She suggests that 'speaking up' has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces through tools including blogs, wikis, news sites and discussion lists.

Social media platforms are among some of the many forms of networked spaces that provide a glimpse into how the boundaries of human voice and social interactions are being reshaped. Fenton (2012) reminds us that a significant proportion of social media use is personal and entertainment-oriented, based on self-identity construction and self-actualisation. Such identities are communicated to others via the sum of the social discourse between online participants – that is, text, talk and images shared with others who are part of our social networks online. Baxter (2010) clarifies that, in online contexts, discourse is a system of meaning, a series of propositions that cohere around a given object of meaning. Gee (2014) describes the voice behind spoken or written texts, and the need to empower the voice behind such texts, in order to understand the social language in such texts that provides information about the speaker or author.

Voice provides a digital transcript of the social exchanges of participants, showcasing the cues participants use to make preferencing decisions online. Deciding who to socialise with requires participants to make assessments of others based on the cues intentionally and sometimes unintentionally provided through interactions with others. Participants often try to replicate the personal nature of face-to-face exchanges offline in online contexts through devices such as emoticons – to signal friendliness, for example – and at other times punctuation is used to insert feelings into online exchanges (Baym, 2010). These prompts include the text, photographs, social languages and content generated by participants in constructing their online personas, which they then share with others. Social language is one of the many ways in which people build socially situated identities and personas through the choice of language, recognisable to others (Gee, 2014).

The nature of social interactions that take place online, and how to maximise connections, are social issues that are important to many professions. An awareness and understanding of such cues is important for designers of online communication in forming connections that may develop into something more purposeful, like responding or engaging, over time (Schoenmaker, 2016). Converting connections into something more akin to relating is important for those professions, such as public relations, where building and maintaining relationships with others, both on and offline, remains central to contemporary practice (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). The focus of this study was to explore voice within the online discourse that facilitates social interactions within contemporary public relations practice.

Social media have blurred the traditional ways of interacting with others

Social media have altered the nature of sociality, challenging traditional notions of interacting socially with others in such spaces. Online, social activity manifests as participation, connectivity, user-generation, information-sharing and collaboration (Henderson & Bowley, 2010). Interacting via social media differs from other web-based interactions by allowing for two-way communication exchanges between participants, inferring the dialogic and collaborative potential of these mediums (Page et al., 2014). The co-location of participants is no longer a requirement for interaction where participants can communicate from disparate geographic locations using online media. Clarke (1998) affirms this shows how social media are blurring social boundaries and challenging our preconceptions of interacting with others.

New social routines are developing in online contexts, allowing participants to make preferencing decisions about who to connect with and who to ignore. Knowing the virtual cues participants use in making decisions about who to socialise with online is important in forming and sustaining connections. Sharing content builds connections that are sustained around sharing, and that dissipate when commonality and interest begins to wane. Deciding who to interact with online relies on the digital cues provided by others, such as photographs, memes or other sign systems; these are all visual cues that, according to Knapp (1983) are critical in forming connections with others. Connections are the necessary precursor to converting connections into something more. Participants are attempting to replicate the intimate nature of personal exchanges in mediated spaces that are typically devoid of emotion. Online, emoticons, capital letters and emojis attempt to recreate the complexity of human emotions, with varying levels of success.

Van Dijck (2013) explains the pervasiveness of social media in infiltrating our everyday lives and provides a perfect illustration of public communication where norms are shaped and challenged, and rules are continually contested. Foucault (1984) suggests that norms constitute the social and cultural glue that regulates the behaviour of individuals within a particular community. Norms that guide our behaviour and interactions offline do not easily translate seamlessly to online contexts. The impersonal nature of interactions online allows participants to assess and easily terminate connections with the click of a mouse – a norm that is unacceptable offline. Social conventions and practices online are in a constant state of flux as patterns of behaviour that traditionally existed in physical socialisation are blurred with the sociotechnical norms created in online spaces (Van Dijck, 2013). The new social routines manifesting online are more transactional than personal in nature, which has negative social repercussions for some online participants. Mackay (2013) explains that the downsides of our increasing dependence on technology are greater feelings of isolation and depression, the unrealistic pursuit of utopian ideals and relationships ending at unprecedented rates, which are all opposite to the intended outcomes of socially interacting with others. So while we may be more connected in the virtual world, it appears that we may also be less relational within those interactions.

Socialising online represents 'platformed sociality'

Socialising and interacting with others in online contexts conflates the notion of human connectedness with automated connectivity. Social media imply a user-centred channel of communication, a facilitator of human communication and networks where participants create social capital through interacting with each other. While acknowledging the sociality of social media, Van Dijck (2013) reminds us that it inevitably remains an automated system that engineers and manipulates connections, and in which relationships become coded by algorithms tracing interactions between those who participate. The context of virtuality, suggest Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), irreversibly changes the nature of interactions, making them more transactional than interpersonal in nature. Despite the descriptors of social media as participatory and collaborative, such media nurture connections and build communities technologically rather than personally, resulting in a 'platformed sociality' that has matured to such an extent that is has become an integral part of our everyday socialising with others (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 5).

Couldry (2008) supports Macnamara's (2013) call for attention to voice within communication scholarship. Extending the discussion of the role of voice in digital contexts, Couldry (2008, p. 386) explains that interaction via social media provides participants with 'the capacity to tell important stories about oneself – to represent oneself as a social, and therefore potentially political agent – in a way that is registered in the public domain'. It is in this representation, virtually, that individuals participate in discussions around social issues that affect them, and that are relevant and important to them. But participation is dependent on a number of variables that privilege the access and voice of some, while limiting the involvement and participation of others. Such variables include digital literacy, access to technology and a willingness to participate – all of which are crucial to being socially connected and having a voice in the conversations that often take place online.

Voice as a form of self-presentation

Within discourse, voice communicates identities to others – identities that are an exhibition and presentation of self that may be inaccurate, inflated and sometimes completely false. Self-presentations online are built from the clues we leave others in the process of crafting our online identities (Baym, 2010). Online personas often provide creative licence for participants to build self-representations by recreating themselves, linking with others and indicating membership with other groups, showing our networks and social connectedness to others. Such links comprise our online representation to others, conveying our behaviours, attitudes and opinions that communicate a range of things to others, including how we are perceived in online contexts. These perceptions, conveyed through the artefacts shared, are important markers for others when deciding whom to interact with and whom to ignore.

Social media provide individuals with an online forum for reconstructing their personas and playing out their social lives virtually. Within our social practices online, boundaries between public and private spaces are also blurring (Papacharissi, 2010). Such imprecision opens up new possibilities for identity construction and distorting

representations of self to others in such spaces. Within social media, content that is generated and shared does more than document our social lives and activities; it also inadvertently allows others to mediate the part we play in social interactions. As active participants online, we can engage directly with others or interact with the content posted by others when we choose to do so. Hogan (2010) describes the nature of this type of interaction via social media as not only a stage on which participants can act out their social lives, but as one where interactions evolve to become a participatory exhibition by those who engage. Facebook posts, content, text and video represent a type of individual exhibition, an online form of presentation of self – similar to the photos of family and friends that people display on their desks in their workplace or on the mantelpiece in their homes. Online practices then become hybrid interactions that share some of the characteristics of offline interactions set within a space of online exhibition (Hogan, 2010). Such exhibitions illustrate the blurring of personal and public spaces in which interactions can occur between participants who no longer need to be co-present within the social exchange, in a specific location and at a specific time.

Voice extends beyond the verbal act of speaking, to include other rhetorical interactions such as composing posts or memes and generating visual content such as photographs and video. The tone of participants' voices online is important for conveying social identities to others and is also important for socially connecting to others. Identities are important in forming social connections and in bringing different dimensions and opinions to conversations around social issues that are important to society. A diversity of opinions expressed through online voices is important in understanding and then formulating responses to pervasive social issues such as binge drinking among Australian youth and its associated societal repercussions.

Voice also plays an important role in developing social networks around particular issues, as it reflects the way individuals gravitate to online voices that express similar opinions, beliefs and values on a particular issue. The interconnectedness between participants' voices is a crucial aspect of social media because, as Cabrera Paz and Schwartz (2009, p. 132) observe, the Internet exists because its 'components are interrelated, and without this interrelatedness there would be no social network'. While such networks cast a wide virtual net, hoping to capture a diversity of voices and opinions, the fluid and amorphous nature of social media makes giving an equal share of voice to participants, and imposing regulations to censure other voices online, problematic. Dominant voices and identities can influence and shape online debates around social issues just as they do offline, which goes a long way to building an individual's self-presentation online but often does little to facilitate the rigorous and open debate necessary to resolve a raft of social issues facing society. The lack of control of online contexts makes social interaction inherently uncertain and tenuous, and completely impractical. The networked effect of online means that when one voice changes, it may have a flow-on effect on others. We cannot control online voices, their views or their opinions, and we cannot prevent an opinion from spreading. The lack of control over communicating messages to particular audiences is not restricted to the online world, but becomes more amplified through social media.

Levine (2008) discusses how youth engage with social media, noting that the media do not give participants either an equal voice or audience, or necessarily a large

one, among conversations that occur online. Others bemoan the potential loss of social capital and the unhealthy side-effects of prolonged dependence on online interaction to fulfil our need to connect and interact socially with others (DiMaggio et al., 2001). A number of government agencies – Australian agencies included – have sought to engage youth in public debate around issues affecting them through the use of campaigns executed in online media, and the campaign at the centre of this case is an example of this. Critics suggest that governments are exploiting the features of social media to engage youth in the political process at a time when they are already developmentally vulnerable. Developmental psychology reminds us that adolescent development has long been understood as a time of 'storm and stress' (Hall, 1904), as marking a shift in reasoning ability (Piaget, 1969) and as a period where identity role confusion is often resolved (Erikson, 1993). Maturation into adulthood, explains Lesko (2001), requires young people to pass through a series of developmental stages as they are still learning the skills necessary for responsible adulthood. Bearing that in mind, all organisations – including governments – need to be able to engage with youth on issues that affect them, and social media environments provide one way to do this (Freedman, 2012). Facebook is fruitful territory in which to investigate these concepts. While social media – and specifically Facebook – provided the rhetorical space to discuss and debate the issue of binge drinking, interaction and engagement of these participants represents a self-actualising and agonistic form of interaction consistent with their developmental journey into adulthood.

Methodology

Following a qualitative approach, this research used a case study methodology, informed by the work of Yin (2014) and Patton (2015). This study represents a nested case, 'a smaller unit of analysis within the overarching case study', which came to the researcher's attention while undertaking fieldwork (Stake, 1995, p. xi). The researcher adopted a 'purposeful sampling strategy referred to as opportunistic', which allowed the researcher to identify a particular campaign as a rich site to explore the voices of the participants of the campaign (Patton, 2015). The site identified was an Australian Government health campaign called Be The Influence (BTI, 2013), largely conducted online, which attempted to hear the voices of youth aged 18–24 years around the prominent societal issue of binge drinking.

To examine the online voices of these participants, the researcher analysed participants' posts to the campaign's Facebook page using discourse analysis. The participants in the campaign were those who created, shared, posted and responded to content on the BTI Facebook page, which received 163,638 likes throughout the course of the campaign. The participants included public relations practitioners as well as other users within the BTI community. The data analysed were drawn from the campaign's Facebook page from 1 January 2013 to 31 April 2013, and again from 1 January 2014 to 1 April 2014, totalling 120 posts comprising text, images and video content. Field notes, social media discourse and organisational documents were also consulted to provide further contextual and background information to the discourse analysis.

An analysis of the BTI discourse focused on uncovering the social realities and meanings that participants shared through their voice online. The BTI community developed organically throughout the course of the campaign, with connections between the participants developing around common experiences and opinions around alcohol consumption (Baym, 2010). This analysis explored the links between the participants' voice as a component of their online discourse and other social elements such as the linguistic, semiotic and inter-discursive features of text within their interactions with others (Fairclough, 2005).

Gee's (2014) model of discourse analysis was applied to analyse the BTI Facebook data. A central assumption of Gee's approach is the meaning derived from the data is situated within the context of the campaign. The meaning interpreted is based on our construal of that context, as well as our past knowledge and experience of drinking alcohol in social settings (Gee, 2014). As such, the meaning that emerges is dynamic rather than static, constantly revised and renegotiated between participants as they interact with each other. The strength of Gee's approach is its reflexivity, exposing the reflexive properties of the voice as participants describe the multiple and socially constructed realities around alcohol experience, which are then shared by these participants (Gee, 2014). Gee's model was also chosen because of its emphasis on the sociality of language; he explains that language communicates to others what participants are 'saying, doing and being', which creates the common meanings that sustain the social practices of groups (2014, p. 31).

The analysis of the BTI data took place over four stages: identifying motifs or themes within the data; situating meaning of the online discourse by applying six tools of inquiry; reflective questioning; and identifying areas of convergence, agreement and coverage within the data. The results of the analysis identified key themes within the campaign data that describe and illuminate the function of voice online. Willig (2015) supports Gee's description of language as social performance where voice conveys content as well as intent. She explains that for communication scholars, discourse analysis provides a way of understanding discourse alongside the nature of social phenomena as it highlights the discursive practices used by participants when interacting with each other to achieve both social and interpersonal objectives.

Findings

Analysis of the online voices of the BTI participants provides useful insights into the nature of the interactions around this social issue. These insights suggest that the enacting properties of voice were important in establishing and maintaining connections with others in mediated contexts by developing situated meaning among the participants and constructing social identities recognisable to others. Further, voice was instrumental in influencing the preferencing decisions made by those who use social media to conduct their social lives. The text in italics in this part of the article represents the online discourse of the BTI participants.

Voice enacted situated meaning among online participants

Socially mediated spaces are in a constant state of flux, so situated meanings are constantly revised and negotiated between participants in and through communicative social interactions. This analysis examined the specific meaning of the text, phrases and images, the participants' voice, and the characteristics it assumed in specific contexts of use. Participants constructed text to guide the reader in developing meaning based on what was said, as well as the context in which it was said. From *puking and waking up on a park bench, regretting everything*, the situated meaning showed rebel participants wished they had made different choices the night before. In contrast, from the excerpt *be a legend, not a mess,* rebels construe this to mean more responsible behaviour from their peers who value enjoying and remembering their social activities with others.

The language favoured by BTI participants was context dependent, which facilitated the building of relations through sharing relevant content between those who chose to interact within the campaign. Language delivered situated meaning within this particular context and was instrumental in maintaining relations that were established online. These contexts, in turn, built and supported the forming of connections with others, promoting interactions over time. Situated meanings arose as the language of participants was recognised and understood by others as the participants unconsciously applied tacit knowledge to interpret the content and intent of the communicative interaction. These meanings were recognised and understood by others, and established common ground, furthering connections and also opening up the possibility of ongoing interactions in the future. Consider the following excerpt: *getting smashed and waking up on a park bench regretting everything about the night before.* As an exemplar of language being context dependent, this excerpt shows participants inferred the meaning of *smashed* in the *BTI* context, to encompass notions of letting go and opting out, drinking to excess, escaping and a loss of control.

Examining how participants combine voice with other components of online discourse provides crucial insights into the social lives of these participants (Barton & Lee, 2013). These meanings were then recognised and understood by others, establishing common ground and connecting those within the interaction. The networked effect of online communication extended the reach of these interactions to others, opening up the possibility of furthering such connections and multiplying the possibility of those with whom participants could potentially interact socially. The choice of language used by the participants created a context – an invisible backdrop – for interactions that were understood inherently by others and established different possibilities for socialising with others. The language of the participants within their discourse conveyed to others what was going on in and around the individual participants in the case organisation in online communities, and provided insights into the nature of social interactions in online spaces.

Voice constructed social identities recognisable to others

In addition to situating meaning, the voice of these participants also played a significant role in enacted social identities recognisable to others. Four social identities were enacted within BTI: *Bingers*, *Influencers*, *Educators and Ambassadors*. While participants' voices

enacted such identities, assessing the authenticity of those identities was problematic. Stone (1991) condemns the internet for challenging the notion revered in many cultures that each body gets one self (Stone, 1995). Baym (2010) contextualises such identities in social media spaces, referring to them as 'disembodied identities' where digital spaces separate selves from actual bodies and such identities exist only in actions and words (Baym, 2010, p. 105). Regardless of its legitimacy, constructing an online persona is important to facilitating social interactions with like-minded others. Online personas provide insights into the beliefs, values and social habits of the individuals behind those identities. Participants adopted multiple identities and personas when interacting online, and this represented different ways of *being* in virtual spaces at different times and for different purposes. These identities did not necessarily represent the authentic selves of the participants, but did provide a means for participants to act out different social roles online.

Interactions between these participants showed individuals privileging and disprivileging identities, replicating the social inequalities evident in interactions that might take place offline. The social interactions of the participants within this case suggest that socially similar identities were an important factor in the formation, development, maintenance and dissolution of interactions (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2002). Participants shared their personas with others through text, photographs, video and other content which others used to assess their social resemblance and shared interests. These activities of the participants are reflective of the broad social process that takes place during the beginning stages of any interaction, a sorting and selecting of individuals according to information shared in different social contexts (Mesch & Talmud, 2007).

Schoenmaker (2016) argues that discourse analysis is a useful way of interrogating discourses online, as language does so much more than merely convey information in online contexts. It connects individuals with others through enacting social identities, builds but also terminates connections and signals the types of interactions participants wish to have with others in mediated environments. Parker (1992) captures the function of discourse in online contexts succinctly, describing it as statements that bring social objects into being, enacting the social life of the participants it sets out to describe. Further, discourse analysis shows how online voice conveys identities to others, which can shape the continuation or termination of interactions that may take place between individuals through online social spaces. For communicators, this demonstrates that social similarity is an important variable that opens up possibilities for relations with others and how participants select who to attempt to relate to online. Further, it shows how information that is shared conveys identities to others that can shape the content and quality of the relations that may take place between individuals in online social spaces.

Voice influenced the preferencing decisions of participants in online contexts

The narratives emerging within the campaign discourse focused on how the voice of participants built and destroyed connections and interactions among participants, which influenced their preferencing decisions online. The four social identities within the campaign – Bingers, Influencers, Educators and Ambassadors – each developed a

unique voice through posting content that resonated and connected them to others. *Bingers* represented the 'party voice' and were very social creatures, socialising with friends and telling others about it through text and images online. Alcohol was crucial as a social lubricant for Bingers and was reflected in a typical post, such as *bad decisions make good stories*. The social interactions of this group were heavily influenced by peers and their opinions and actions, both on and offline. The social activities of *Bingers* centred on entertainment, such as the Big Day Out music festivals, sporting events, surfing, skating, watching football and drinking with their friends. The celebratory atmosphere of these events appealed to the social nature and habits of *Bingers*, whose primary focus was themselves and having a good time. *Influencers*, by comparison, were the 'voice of reason', suggesting that they may have had a longer history with alcohol which had been more negative than positive. Their identity was evident in their discourse, such as *don't let bingeing get in the way of a good time* or *make sure you don't get carried away and do something you'll regret*. They openly shared their experience and wisdom with others online, hoping to change their behaviour and opinions towards alcohol.

Educators differed from *Influencers* as their online voice was less emotive and more factual, attempting to modify the behaviour of other participants through sharing facts and figures around alcohol consumption, such as the content shared in Figure 1.
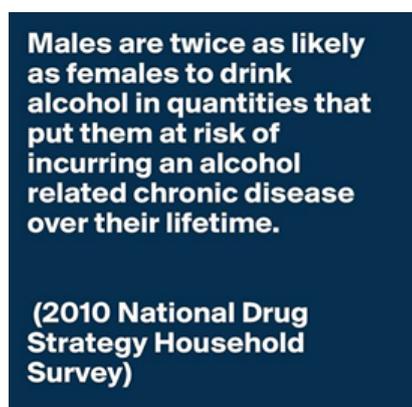
Facebook post 12 June 2013   Facebook post 10 May 2014

Figure 1: The online discourse of Educators within BTI

Ambassadors were high-profile sports stars who lent their support to the campaign, espousing a view that a healthy relationship with alcohol represented the purist's voice within the discourse. The discourse of *Ambassadors* was powerful in integrating language with actions, interactions and ways of thinking and believing, and was typically shared via short videos posted to the BTI Facebook page. Their discourse encouraged others to imitate their behaviour through posts such as *say no to one drink too many; don't become a statistic;* and *settle down hero I'm keen to remember this*.

The identities constructed through the online voice of participants conveyed personas to others that influenced their preferencing decisions about who to interact with online. Peer-to-peer communication was the most influential voice in connecting

participants to the anti-binge drinking message. Language like: *Yo people, must haves, head over to, check it out, selfies, big congrats, massive shout out* and *chill out with use* were examples of vernacular, cool, popular language, suggesting participants wanted to build social, friendly, peer-to-peer, non-deferential relationships with others in this context. Language such as *don't get carried away and do anything you will regret, stay safe till the last set, keep an eye on your mates* and *say no to one drink too many*, suggested participants wanted to exercise power over others within relationships online, trying to influence or modify other participants' behaviour towards binge drinking.

Adopting an influential tone of voice and attempting to persuade others to consider a viewpoint contrary to their own was unappreciated by other participants and was more likely to terminate, rather than strengthen, connections between those online. For example, the following *Influencer* post, *If you are having a big day out this weekend remember to stay hydrated and have a water break regularly between drinks*, elicited the following responses from a *Binger*: *have a whiskey break between beers, water breaks for chicks wearing white t-shirts or have a water break between each pill.*

The voice adopted by individual participants demonstrated its power in facilitating and destroying social interactions online and in the subsequent preferencing decisions made by participants in pursuing or terminating interactions with others. The tone of voice, expressed through the language used by participants, conveyed participants' opinions to others – for example, *you don't need to get wasted to have a good time.* Sharing such opinions influenced the preferencing decisions of others in determining whether to continue or terminate the interaction.

Interacting online satisfied a range of social needs for these participants, including conversations, social engagement, community membership, having a voice and exchanging opinions that constituted predominantly rhetorical activities. It shows how these components were instrumental in providing social cues to others that influenced their decisions to engage, or not, with others online. Such decisions influenced the individual participant's selectivity and receptivity to the content shared by others. Selectivity describes the participant's quality of being selective, fastidious or discriminating among the content posted by users online ('Selectivity', 2017) while receptivity refers to participant's ability to receive, consider and respond to the ideas and content shared by others ('Receptivity', 2017). Both selectivity and receptivity were important in a participant's decision to interact with others, so crucial in connecting, responding, engaging or terminating social relations with others online. In virtual spaces, understanding what influences the selectivity and receptivity of participants in choosing whom to interact with socially is important for communicators trying to connect with participants around issues online. It appears that shared social characteristics, such as compatible opinions, behaviours and beliefs, conveyed through online voice, are important clues that enhance interactions between participants online.

Conclusions

Understanding voice as an inextricable component of online discourse is important for communicators interested in connecting and nurturing those connections with others online (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Voice is context dependent, and creates the 'in between'

that fills in gaps between the language used and the meaning that is both inferred by the sender and understood by other participants. Understanding the voices of the BTI participants required participants to apply tacit knowledge in interpreting and making sense of the interactions online. From this, we can learn that the meaning of language varies in different contexts of use, with context playing an important role in explicating the meaning that participants infer from language within discursive interactions online. The language used by participants, and the semiotic objects that comprised their online discourse, provided clues to others, including communicators, regarding how to react and respond to interactions within the context in which the discourse was created and used.

This nested case showed an important intersection between social media and the social use of language, illustrating the linguistic variables that exist within online discourse. These variables include the structure of the discourse (typography, spelling, word choice); meaning (symbols, words, utterances and exchanges); interactions (turn-taking, topics of discussion and the sociality of language); and identity construction (humour, play and conflict) as important components in forming connections with others online (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011). Social interactions that ignore these variables, and that are incongruent with the context in which the interaction takes place, are more likely to harm rather than nurture connections and ongoing interactions with others online.

Voice enacts social identities that are recognisable to others, by using voice, language text and images to convey their social practices and beliefs to others through language. Acknowledging the notion of disembodied identities, and designing communicative interactions, requires us to adopt a Hansel and Gretel approach, following the virtual clues participants leave behind in social spaces and acknowledging that communicative interactions must be inherently social to have any chance of penetrating the social spheres of participants online. Interacting online demands a different mindset, which involves humanising and personalising information for disciplines, such as public relations, which are seeking to engage and relate to those who inhabit online spaces through health-promotion discourses. Further, following the virtual clues provided by participants through observing before interacting will assist public relations practitioners to understand the nature of exchanges that could improve relations online.

Discourse analysis was a useful means of exploring voice, as a component of online discourse, and important in facilitating and terminating interactions in online worlds. This work suggests discourse enacts social identities, uncovers the nature of interactions and helps us to understand how participants decide who to interact with socially online. As designers of communication in online contexts, voice – as a part of discourse – is instrumental in the preferencing decisions of participants, and is important within social discourse and interactions with others online. These insights may prove useful for disciplines like public relations in attempting to connect with and influence the behaviour of publics around a particular issue through virtual mediums.

Social media platforms are among the many forms of networked interactions that are already offering us a glimpse of how the boundaries of social interaction and communication are being reconstituted right before our eyes (Theunissen, 2015). Online is a complex and often uncertain environment where a multitude of communication styles are in play. There is considerable value in researching interactions in online contexts, as it

opens up new ways of understanding the nuances of communication, connection and interaction that these spaces afford. Examining how participants combine voice with other components of online discourse provides crucial insights into the social lives of these participants (Barton & Lee, 2013). It also helps communicators to package information to connect online participants with social issues that are deemed to be relevant and important to them, both personally and as part of public discourse and the building of social capital.

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