

Username, Anonymity and the Online Self on Reddit

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In this mini ethnography, I hope to tackle the concept of identity, and how identity of self is represented and constructed through usernames on Reddit. I will be using two contrasting terms consistently throughout the text: online and offline or IRL (for in real life). I have chosen to focus my attention on Reddit due to its inherently anonymous nature, and its conversationally driven community. Unlike other platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, where individuals focus on how the self is presented, Reddit is about how one fits in to larger groups, and it does not require an IRL community to be a part of one online. Here, identity isn't defined by a name so much as by one's words and actions. It ultimately doesn't matter who you identify as in the literal sense but what communities you choose to partake in, how much you share, and how much you give back. I find this lack of emphasis on the individual makes the study of a name more potent as any meaning that does become attached to it may in fact become more impressionable due to its invisibility.

Something I'd like to make note of is that as I reviewed my notes and previous analyses of my research, I realized that my objectivity in my reporting is very low, as much as I thought I was being so. I believe a significant reason as to why is because social media, particularly Youtube and Reddit for me have been a great source of action and comfort during times when my mental health was extremely low in the past couple of years. Reddit in particular has been a relentlessly supportive place for finding community around specific ailments, so though my research does not focus on mental health, I do make mention of it and hope to expand on this in a separate research paper at some point in the future.

Reddit is a platform on which people can truly be themselves without the concern of being recognized if one chooses to remain unidentifiable. Usernames Redditors will use will

often be gibberish, seemingly random combinations of unrelated words, and very rarely, contain real names. Upon creating an account, there is also an option to have a randomly generated username. This has led me to hypothesize a few things. First, names are intentional – often with the implicit goal of staying hidden. They are also intentional in what a person wants a viewer to know about them, they will hold a story or a glimpse at their sense of humor. Second, the rare uses of real names are for intraplatform branding purposes and in contrast to a typical Reddit name, are meant to make the person very easily identifiable and searchable. Usernames can create a sense of consistency both throughout multiple platforms and/or within a single platform in relation to other individual identifiers such as profile image, description, and online behaviors. Third, anonymity uniquely creates a sense of belonging on this platform. Where this could otherwise be alienating or suspicious elsewhere, on Reddit, it is expected, and hence is part of a sense of online normalcy that goes unquestioned and creates space for expression and support.

The online world is such a fascinating realm, with so many possibilities that we can only know so much about it and what it has to offer (or the harm it can do). We can access so much but we often ignore how much it can access us and our personal information. We stay connected with everyone, but then we must question; when does that connection become overwhelming and cross boundaries of self-care and personal space? There is a lot to cover, so I can't do it all. When I was first coming up with a research proposal for this ethnographic piece, I had trouble narrowing my focus, thinking at first that I would write about data privacy, and its commodification by corporations.

I began my fieldnotes with little confidence in my direction. I didn't even know how I would pick a single platform to focus on, considering how each one is its own goldmine of information. I thought I would begin with Tik Tok seeing as it is more relevant with Generation

Z and I would ideally like this to be relevant. Because technology has been evolving so quickly, it seems each generation becomes more irrelevant more quickly as we fall behind with existing trends and softwares.

I began taking notes as I dedicated myself to scrolling through Tik Tok. Because I wanted to stay in the realm of privacy and personal information, I took note of how Tik Tokers presented themselves, if they showed their faces, if their names were real, and what verbal information they shared about themselves. I was hoping to find patterns in terms of what was revealed or concealed, and how the Tik Tokers' brand might align with these choices. Looking back at my notes however, I found particular interest in the names themselves, and how these other elements surrounded the name. What stuck out to me in particular was how many names were gibberish and random combinations of words. Why not use a real name, especially if a lot of users were showing their faces and using their real voices? I found myself asking what the intention and thought was behind a username. Was there intention at all or was it just random. When people did use their real names, why did they choose to do so? Was privacy a relevant consideration, or was it more about how much or little someone cared?

Branding is a big theme in social media. Kids need to think about how they present their online self for the sake of socially fitting in as much as adults do to fit a professional image in the working world. Maybe names were tied to that? But how much so? There seems to be so much to get out of a name, and a lot of that ties back to privacy. A name is an extension of an identity, and identity is something we may or may not want to share. It can be highly personal, but it can change based on community, how safe we feel, and how we want to connect with others. In essence, a name is malleable and multidimensional, and those dimensions change with context. A name, particularly an online name, is an everchanging abstract entity that we choose ourselves,

meaning the intention in an online name is what separates it from an IRL one. Another key difference to consider is that an IRL or legal name is most often imposed on us by someone else. Dreams, expectations, cultural inheritance, family history etc. are imposed on us through an IRL name. Our online usernames give us complete control over our identity. We decide who we want to be.

I had yet to focus on a specific platform at this point, so to further explore these new questions, I spoke to someone who had one online handle for most of their platforms, in order to understand why the name stuck, and how the identity associated with it might shift depending on the platform.

Simulacra

We were able to meet in person, as at this point during the COVID pandemic, we were both vaccinated, and we agreed to sit six feet apart. The internalized anxiety of having to deal with such precautions had become so normalized at that point that it would take a lot of reflection to realize how much it still bothered me. Communicating online had really been lifesaving, and it continues to mitigate the harshness of our current reality by breaking our social interactions up into digestible bits between long periods of no in person interaction.

Upon arriving at the individual's studio apartment, who I will refer to by his screen name Segaman098, I noticed the shoe bench ahead of us in the hall as I walked through the apartment door. I automatically went to take my shoes off as Segaman098 shuffled back toward his kitchen, asking if I wanted anything to drink. We were both still masked. I walked further in in my socks. The floor was cold tile, the walls were white and plain, with a black and white tiling in the kitchen. The studio was spacious for a New York apartment, certainly larger than my room,

which could barely fit a full-sized bed. He had minimal furniture, with a bedframe, a TV stand, a white hydraulic desk and an ergonomic looking rolling chair.

We sat up at the kitchen counter on two black barstools.

“Are you comfortable taking your mask off?” he asked as he reached toward his face.

“Yeah, we’re both vaccinated so it’s whatever.” I replied as I removed mine. I snapped the ear bands around my wrist, and proceeded to pull out my notebook. I lay it open on the counter along with my phone and a pen.

“Thanks for having me over! I figure I’ll get straight to the point. Are you okay if I record this interview for future reference? It won’t be shared outside of class or anything.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s fine.”

“And I won’t share your name or anything either.”

“Haha, that’s fine, thanks.”

I went to start the recording app on my phone, and as I did this, I began giving Segaman098 the run-down of what I was going to ask him about and how I had come to the decision to talk about his name. I began by asking about the platforms he uses, and where his name came from. His brother made it up for him based on a game he liked playing and the year he started using email. He described his name as an extension of his identity, where knowing him only online would create a much different idea of who he was than knowing him in person would.

“...you’d have a very different view of me because I mostly lurk, and when I do post, it’s super random, I’ve commented on SF politics and video game stuff, and organizing meetups on the gay gamer subreddit, so - it’s very eclectic.”

He brings up a term I’d never heard before, ‘simulacra.’ According to Merriam Webster’s definition, this term is “an image or representation. It can also be an insubstantial form

or semblance of something” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). In contrast, Segaman098 defined it as a simulation that becomes more real than the actual thing. He brought this up while discussing what he felt Facebook did to others, where it almost felt like it represented them better than their real selves did. He denied having a Facebook himself, and also denied feeling his online persona replaced him, and repeated that it was strictly an extension rather than a replacement of himself.

I struggle with the concept of the extended self. Is it really an extension or is it a persona? When considering the way we interact with our social circles in person, a persona would make more sense. We change our behaviors and adapt to each social group we belong to. In some, we withhold elements of our behavior and in others we act goofier and feel more or less unrestrained. Perhaps this referencing to an extension is that in the same sense of how we adapt IRL. It’s simply an adaptation of our personality to fit into some other form of community we are taking part in.

This was actually confirmed a bit further into our conversation:

“... you mentioned it as an extension rather than a replacement, right? There is a distinction.”

“ Yeah, for me personally it feels more like it isn’t a replacement of me, it’s just a part of who I am. It’s like my online persona I guess.”

He further describes how this persona is a version of himself that gets to talk about “nerdy” things. He’s connected to people within this specific community on the basis of having nerd culture in common. With people IRL, he might connect over something like school, work, or family. There is a contextual history there that may impose imaginary barriers to showing other facets of himself. With each context comes attached implied social rules and norms, and breaking those down can take time, and can be controversial. Online however, particularly on Reddit, the lack of initial context means that everyone is starting with a clean slate and the only

determinant of what will be allowed is based around a specific subreddit, which is in turn often dictated by a strict set of rules created by moderators. This takes the ambiguity out of what might normally be present in IRL interactions.

Under this consideration, all forms of self are simulacra, but more particularly so online personas, because online, we represent ourselves visually with a name, an image, a sub header/descriptor, and our recorded activity. The representation of ourselves becomes literal. Whether or not that representation is more or less real than IRL is a debate for another paper.

Noise

Online is very noisy. Noisy not in the auditory sense of the term but in the visual sense. When our eyes are presented with too much information, they don't know where to focus and they jump from page to page and they get tired. Then, there's the endless scroll, originally designed for Instagram and since has taken off on pretty much all platforms. With no end to the content, our brains become overwhelmed – my brain gets overwhelmed. I get lost for hours scrolling up and down. This is actually part of what got me to deactivate my Facebook. Strangely enough, my scrolling addiction has not gotten nearly as bad on Reddit. Consider though, that what I deem to be a small amount of scrolling is equivalent to the length of 9.6K bananas layed end to end. This measurement was provided by Reddit's annual recap. Perhaps it is the lack of audio and imagery on the site. There is noise in terms of endless content, but the content is limited in its format. Because it is mostly text, it is not as easy to get hits of dopamine from reading titles and skipping over entire sentences. The point is, I have to sit and dedicate myself to reading something. Thinking about this reminded me of a couple contrasting texts read in class – one of which was a list, the other which was presented as a descriptive novel. Reddit is a literal list, it's infinitely long, is mostly text with bits of video and still imagery sprinkled in throughout.

However, each item in that list is expanded upon for varying amounts depending on the poster. Some people are extremely verbose while others say what they need/want to say in a single sentence. The diversity, the lack of clickbait headlines, and the added fact that every individual post is made by complete strangers renders the act of skimming less functional as one won't get any meaningful information out of it. To add to that, the conversational nature of these posts makes it more enticing to click into posts because much of the intellectual action will happen in the comments.

Because names on Reddit are so vague and their meanings are not often a point of discussion on the platform, I suspect that they are of little interest to others. When I read through threads and comments, I rarely look at names (save for the focus I have on them now for the sake of research). All I care about is the content the individual wrote. The lack of a name means I don't formulate an idea about the person prior to reading what they have to say. I have nothing to go off of besides what they write, and where they are posting. The name will very rarely contribute to that. It leads me to conclude that the lack of a name is in fact a sort of repression of a form of noise. Noise as judgement is gone on Reddit. You cannot judge what you cannot see or associate with generalizations. Instead, a judgement must be made based on something that is much more detailed and thoughtful: the community this poster is in, the content they wrote about, the questions or celebrations or rants they are expressing. It shows what they value or what they care about, what they are afraid of or what they dislike. A viewer is no longer blinded by the noise of their most immediate judgements. This is further emphasized when exploring individual profiles on Reddit.

The name will be attached to a profile image, often on Reddit it will be a generic avatar of an alien-like creature with a rainbow spectrum of skin color options, outfits, and facial

expressions. The username, the name that is seen in all interactions, comments, posts etc, is below another name, which is a more “official” name though these also tend to be nonsensical, and are never referenced throughout interactions on the platform. Here, we can also see the amount of time someone has had an account open, their “cake day” which can easily be faked, and their Karma points.

Karma are points that are accumulated based on the amount of online activity one has. You can get points when your comments or posts get upvoted – meaning people approve or enjoy it. Downvotes can cause the loss of Karma. Overall it gives others a sense of whether or not you are being disagreeable and it gamifies the platform use. An example of this will be discussed in the following section.

Sounds and Consistency

There are videos with audio sound. Most often, these are livestreams with people playing music of some kind whether it be DJing, singing, or playing an instrument. Streaming is only accessible to those who have a certain amount of Karma. As just mentioned, Karma are points you collect as a Redditor based on how often you post or comment and how many upvotes you get on said content. This system serves as a way to motivate users to remain positive, as negative comments or hate can get downvoted and cause you to lose Karma, or can even get you thrown out of a subreddit community by the moderators. Reaching 100000 Karma unlocks the ability to produce live streams. The streamer’s name is not visible on the pop up that comes up with the video. Often, streamers will instead put their handwritten username or Venmo on screen somewhere, or they’ll edit it into their video formatting. Usually, both are the same. This suggests a branding intention. Those who build enough Karma to stream spend thousands of hours of their time on Reddit, meaning they are dedicated, and particularly focused on growing

on this platform. To then have a Venmo account with the same username suggests strategy. Consistency across other platforms make the streamer easier to find elsewhere too, hence contributing to a faster increased following and ultimately, more money and recognition.

I scroll through an endless page of r/content, skipping over livestreams, ignoring whatever seems like advertisement, and occasionally pausing to closely read a title. I click on the top livestream, and there is a man in a suit and tie who appears surprisingly professional for the platform. The sound is initially muted and until I tap the microphone to hear, I think that it's strange as it almost looks like he is doing a formal presentation. I realize looking down at the page title that this is r/Headlineworthy. Oh, so is this a news anchor just hanging out from home? He has plants in the background, a commenter by the name of Sahiga in the right column says "Dude, his snake plant is a unit."

Upon looking closer, I see the man's name is written on a piece of paper and attached to said snake plant, the plant leaf is stabbed through the paper. It seems he did not account for mirroring since the name is read backwards. I try to decipher it one letter at a time- @-A-F...f? e-e-n, feen? I slowly continue, ah. @AFreemansView. Would I have bothered trying if I wasn't actually studying names? If the whole point of his name in this context is to get a following, it might now work out if no one can read it, but then again, he is having a top livestream. Perhaps his success is tied more to his online participation rather than to his name recognition. It's hard to say, which leads me to wonder then if there would be any point in including it in the first place.

To see if this has the same purpose as the name on the last stream though, I switch screens and go to my phone, where I open Venmo and do indeed find @AFreemansView. His full name here is Jefferson Freeman. There is no profile photo though, and there aren't any noteworthy transactions that would tie this account back to the one on Reddit. I have no idea if

this is the same person. If I was trying to make money off my streams, I would definitely want to make sure people knew it was me. Imagine how much one might lose out on because people are concerned they might not be sending their money to the correct person. It doesn't add up.

I take this further. I look him up on Instagram. There are only two results. One has a profile picture with a face that matches the streamer's, blonde, scruffy, and somehow somewhat goofy-looking despite the initially professional image on Reddit. It's also just occurring to me that he's using his name to imply he is a "free man with a view." Clever, I guess. His Instagram bio says he is "First President of the Earth, Unfortunately." His full name, including his middle name, is there too. The photos are not specific to his news anchor streaming. They contain cats and beer, and seem to be at various locations, none of which include the plant laden background seen in his stream. He was so easy to find, so I question if this is on purpose. Why should he publicize his real name, and make it easier to confirm his personal Instagram rather than his Venmo account? Maybe he's not doing it for the money and maybe the name is not for branding, at least not in the same way the DJ from the other day used it.

Finding Meaning

I logged into Reddit and proceeded to search in my [activity] history in order to find the community I thought I could post in. R/Casualconversation. I had previously found an old post from 9 years ago with someone asking about names on R/Askreddit. Oddly enough they did not post the reason for their own name, u/RainbowBrite1920. I found said sub I posted on with a google search for an appropriate sub and wrote this:

"I found a similar question but it was posted 8 years ago and so I wanted to see what people had to say in 2021. How did you choose your username?

Also, are you trying to stay anonymous, known, or don't care?

Asking both out of curiosity and for a school project on names.

I just kept whatever reddit generated for me, and I like the anonymity for exploring mental health and odd questions in general!”

I included my own reasons to encourage more sharing from others, and kept the language casual – as the subreddit is named. Through a UX group I follow on Reddit, I also learned about the existence of another page, r/Samplesize which is a page made specifically for interview questions. The rules on this subreddit are rigid. We must specify the intention in brackets in the title, and in parenthesis include the audience. The post must include a related tag. Here is what I wrote:

“I’m doing a small research project on usernames on Reddit. How did you choose yours, why? what determines whether you use your real name or more gibberish or made-up terms? And is this name consistently used on other online platforms? Why or why not?”

The responses I got were diverse in nature, and really fun to read.

There was a mix of straightforward, humorous, and meaningful responses, some of which expressed nostalgia and others highlighting banal moments that had stuck out to them. “The corn! It’s so random!” I exclaimed this to my roommate as I had been reading.

BiggestBlackestCorn has commented: “I like corn, the bigger the better.” We had a short laugh and I returned to my reading. We can presume to know what the name actually meant but I don’t wish to go in that direction in this text.

This story stood out to me as particularly cute;

“I got my name as a kid in 4th grade. We would have foot races and I beat all the 4th graders. Then I raced the 5th grade "Champ" and I beat him. My cousin (also 4th grader) started calling me that in school causing everyone to start calling me that...”

- Slow-Down_Turbo

This one's simplicity was charming;

“I was hungry and I wanted a burger” – iwantagoodburger

In a peer review of some of this narrative I had written, they pointed out that someone who was not seeking these stories would have no idea about the backgrounds behind a name, so how was it relevant? Well again, I am looking for intention. Intention isn't necessarily for others but for the self. Whether or not someone knows how Slow-Down_Turbo got their name, what might matter is that the individual feels well represented. Perhaps this more intimate connection to their name suggests that Reddit is a place for nostalgia and comfort for them. When looking at their Reddit profile, the majority of their activity is on a subreddit called r/AskReddit where random questions are posed such as “What helps you get hired at an interview?” down to “If your life was a TV show, how interesting would it be to watch?” This seems like an escape, a pure source of harmless entertainment this user might come to take a break from IRL.

On a more sinister note, one of the names seemed to be a cry for help. This particular individual who's name is PatheticPieceofSh1t commented “ehh” eliciting responses of concern from others. In my own experience, the platform has been a great and popular resource for mental health and mental illness in general and seeing posts of this kind (or names in this case) is unsurprising, to a point where I find myself feeling a bit desensitized. However, the fact that this is on a post that I created makes me feel a bit of responsibility, though I have no idea how to handle it besides commenting and offering my advice. The platform as a space for mental health support is a sentiment openly shared by a couple of other commenters;

“I came up with mine during a serious mental health episode. I had recently discovered Reddit and the site seemed different from my usual internet forums/social media. I was seeking

common ground with others. I wanted to be as anonymous as I could. I chose something that described me well, yet was as ambiguous at the time.” – LilRedlaughing

I also want to highlight an interaction I caught in the wild while scrolling in my free time. In r/tooafraidtoask, someone wanted to know why there are so many physical similarities between people with downs syndrome. Scrolling through the comments, I saw a response from Na3C6H507 who gave an elaborate analogy to explain DNA and chromosomes and other biological facts. I thought, “huh, this person seems to know their stuff.” Scrolling further, I find that user Morael, had briefly touched on Na3C6H507’s response, only to focus on their name. They recognized the seemingly random string of numbers as the chemical makeup for sodium citrate. They labeled themselves a chemist, and another commentor expanded calling themselves a “fellow biologist.” In this random hole on Reddit, a group of scientists had found each other because of an otherwise obscure name. The name was meant to be understood only by certain types of people. This sparked interactions that otherwise would not have happened. To someone like me, the name became irrelevant without the appropriate knowledge and instead, I got a flattened version of that image through the content this individual posted.

The name has dynamic of being known or unknown, of communicating something, or hiding it, or of reflecting a person’s inner world in a way that serves only them. It is a way to reach out to others both implicitly and explicitly and way to control the version of ourselves we want others to interact with.

Imagery

Social media is permanent. It is a variety of platforms on which we write down words and post pictures that can be found decades down the line, and used for or against us as a testament to our image. Scrolling back in time will inevitably bring to the surface past version of

ourselves, and whatever we put out there will define who we are. Reddit is unique in that it enables niches, and ranges from elaborate and full with oversharing to contained, simple, quick, and curated content.

As mentioned earlier in the audio section, visuals are noise. Reddit subverts the importance of self-presentation online. A name is part of the background, a profile image makes the user an alien, the self-description isn't of much importance because what the Reddit users care about is the community. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter who you're talking to, it matters that you're interacting in the same subreddit. It matters that you're using the platform for similar means of escape, comfort, or knowledge acquisition.

When names and profile pictures do matter, it's because there is something commercial or financial to gain. r/Masterchef for example leaves no room for assumptions. It's the Masterchef franchise. One can tell because the subreddit name is straightforward, the post is a muted video with Chef Gordon Ramsay front and center. When SamsungMobileUS makes a post on the sub, no one intends to click on that thinking they might make a meaningful connection with the "user." Here, the name stands out because it's recognizable. It is the anonymity that brings individuals together on this site, not recognizability.

The top streamers using their username for branding know this and that's okay because they want to be found elsewhere. They need to promote themselves to grow.

As for everyone else, maybe they just want to hang out without being concerned about who knows them and who doesn't and how they will or won't be judged. They can seek help, they talk about their problems – even the most embarrassing or disturbing ones, they can find communities of people they might not find IRL. They can build relationships from scratch or from a place they choose to start from.

Names on Reddit, or say the invisibility of names on Reddit is what brings the users of the platform together. Whether conscious or not, there is intention behind the names, even if they are computer generated, that in itself was a decision a person had to make on the other side of their screen and perhaps such a decision is partly driven by apathy or by the desire to stay at arm's length of discoverability. The name defines the self in the particular context of Reddit scrolling. It affects who will be drawn to having conversation with you and its humility in the social media scene allows broader interests and thoughts to take the limelight and for community to be built from something other than IRL connections and impressions. This paper is unfortunately a very myopic view of what names can be on Reddit. My skills and experience as an ethnographer are certainly in need of more sharpening and I as mentioned early on, there are sub-subjects I could dive deeper into, and plenty more research into each section that I could explore.

There was a recent law passed in New England that is changing the game of online anonymity because of how they are attempting to protect children by restricting age verification methods (Ovide, 2021). There is no way to tell if a birthday is real on Reddit, but what will happen if that changes? How will kids and adults alike be affected?

With that, I hope I left you with more questions than answers.

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