

Il terzo volume della Collana di Studi e di Ricerche *Lingue, Linguaggi e Culture migranti*, a cura dei docenti delle cattedre di Lingue del Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche "Jean Monnet" dell'Università degli Studi della Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", raccoglie, nella quasi totalità, le lezioni di studiosi ospiti dello stesso Dipartimento nell'ambito di un ciclo di seminari che annualmente viene riproposto. In particolare si offre un'esplorazione delle diverse realtà e mescolanze culturali e linguistiche delle aree geo-culturali anglofone, francofone, ispanofone e arabofone, attraverso una molteplicità di prospettive critiche e metodologiche. I contributi presenti nel volume sono attraversati da una serie di linee comuni, che tracciano analisi testuali e culturali sui temi della comunicazione, della semiotica e delle migrazioni, tra gli altri, analizzando testi letterari, linguistici, cinematografici, musicali, massmediali, così come fenomeni sociali e politici transnazionali.

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a cura di

Marta Cariello, Elvira Falivene,
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ANTONIO FRUTTALDO, ANGELA ZOTTOLA¹

«SPILLING THE TEA» IN ACADEMIA:
A QUEER REPRESENTATION
OF THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY THROUGH TWITTER

1. Introduction

Social media platforms are increasingly becoming widespread communicative practices² through which identity is performed and displayed³. If, as Butler argues, the so-called «“coherence” and “continuity” of “the person” are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility»⁴, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts are, thus, used in order to give a voice to specific communities of practice⁵ so as to perform socially recognised identities.

For instance, the case of *Shit Academics Say*⁶ (from now on referred to as SAS)⁷, firstly developed as a blog and slowly expanding on social media

¹ The authors have jointly discussed and conceived this paper. Nevertheless, individual contributions in writing this paper are identified as follows: Antonio Fruttaldo is responsible for Introduction, Section 2, Section 2.1, Section 3, Section 4, Section 4.2, Section 5, Section 5.1; Angela Zottola is responsible for Section 2.2, Section 3.1, Section 4.1, Section 5.2, Conclusions.

² Michele Zappavigna, *Enacting identity in microblogging through ambient affiliation*, in «Discourse and Communication», 8, 2, 2013, pp. 209–228.

³ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, 2nd Edn., New York, Routledge, 1999 [1990]; J. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York/London, Routledge, 2004.

⁴ J. Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, cit., p. 23.

⁵ James M. Swales, *Genre Analysis. English in academic and research settings* (13th Edn.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008 [1990]; J.M. Swales, *Research Genres: Explorations and Applications*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004; Etiennè Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

⁶ Nathan Hall, *@AcademicsSay: The Story Behind a Social Media Experiment*, 2015 (November 2), available online at <https://sasconfidential.com/2015/11/02/the-academicssay-experiment/> (last accessed: June 28, 2016).

⁷ The Twitter account of *Shit Academics Say* can be reached online at <https://twitter.com/AcademicsSay> (last accessed: September 28, 2016). Their Facebook page, on the other hand, is available online at <https://www.facebook.com/academicssay/> (last accessed: September 28, 2016).

environments, has become a guide to humorously surviving the academic world. This has been achieved by performing online the typical hopes, frustrations, and daily experiences academics worldwide face. By doing so, the academic community may find a way to simultaneously see themselves represented and come together as an online community of practice. In other words, SAS becomes a synthetic online identity representative of the real-world persona of the scholar that looks at power relations in Academia with a critical eye. The representation, thus, becomes a presentation⁸, through which the academic community can both look at itself and be looked upon. In the words of Rettberg:

A representation is an object, a sign that is seen as constructed in some way, and that stands instead of an object to which it refers. Talking about representations lets us analyse the selfie, the tweet or the graph of a run. A presentation is an act, something that a person does, so talking about presentations allows us to analyse the way that the person acts to present themselves⁹.

However, the issue is more complicated than that. Indeed, this view may wrongly entail that both representations and presentations are given, while they are in fact to be seen as semiotic systems¹⁰, made of different signs that discursively construct given identities. In this view, connotations play a pivotal role, since these signs do not represent «private associations that only one individual might have, but associations and references that are shared by larger cultures or groups»¹¹. Thus, the way SAS portrays the academic life comprises different semiotic systems that together connote this community in a given way, in order to create a wider online ambient and identity affiliation system¹², that is, an online ‘place’ «in order to

⁸ Jill Walker Rettberg, *Self-Representation in Social Media*, in Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick and Thomas Poell (Eds), *SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications, Inc., 2017 (in press).

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, *The value of the sign*, in Johannes Angermuller, Dominique Maingueneau and Ruth Wodak (Eds), *The Discourse Studies Reader: Main currents in theory and analysis*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014, pp. 21-26.

¹¹ J.W. Rettberg, *Self-Representation in Social Media*, cit.

¹² Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and social media: How we use language to create affiliation on the web*, London/New York, Continuum, 2012; M. Zappavigna, *Enacting identity in microblogging through ambient affiliation*, cit.

commune with a mass online audience»¹³. This ‘place’ revolves around a constructed identity whose «particular discursive patterns of collocative values»¹⁴ are representative of a larger group of people that can see themselves associated with the ‘signs’ specific online accounts use to (re)present themselves (and, consequently, the entire community).

In this process, forms of self-disclosure¹⁵ play a fundamental role in enacting microblogging identities and, most importantly, in establishing interpersonal relationships¹⁶. As Oulasvirta *et al.*¹⁷ highlight, self-disclosure can be broken down along two dimensions: depth (or level of intimacy) and breadth (i.e., amount of information). While the limitations imposed by the medium «may discourage [the] expression of complicated ideas and emotions»¹⁸, the level of intimacy may be heightened by the fact that «potentially embarrassing thoughts may be easier [to express] through a format that is brief and leaves the details to the imagination (and responsibility) of the reader»¹⁹. Self-disclosure is further reinforced by the anonymity online platforms may offer to users, thus, blurring that fine line between individual and community identity.

These forms of self-disclosure are discursively constructed in microblogging by specific ‘signs’. These cues, whether constructed linguistically or by means of other semiotic resources, are used in order to «[make] the ordinary visible to others»²⁰. Indeed, by disclosing specific information related to the academic world, SAS playfully makes the ‘ordinary’ of this community of practice visible to the community itself. Taboos and judgments silently renowned are, therefore, acknowledged, and their disclosure becomes a major factor in the creation of this humorous ‘insider’ identity.

However, as Derlega *et al.*²¹ maintain, one of the most typical ways to

¹³ M. Zappavigna, *Enacting identity in microblogging through ambient affiliation*, cit., p. 210.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Antti Oulasvirta, Esko Lehtonen, Esko Kurvinen and Mika Raento, *Making the ordinary visible in microblogs*, in «Personal and ubiquitous computing», 14, 3, 2010, pp. 237-249.

¹⁶ Irwin Altman and Dalmas A. Taylor, *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973.

¹⁷ A. Oulasvirta, E. Lehtonen, E. Kurvinen and M. Raento, *Making the ordinary visible in microblogs*, cit., pp. 237-249.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 238.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem* (emphasis in the original).

²¹ Valerian J. Derlega, Bonnie Durham, Barbara Goekel and David Sholis, *Sex Differences in Self-Disclosure: Effects of Topic Content, Friendship, and Partner’s Sex*, in «Sex Roles», 7, 4, 1981, pp. 433-447.

enact self-disclosure is represented by forms of gender performativity, more specifically playing on gender stereotypes. In this context, SAS does not seem to play on these notes, and while the successful ‘social experiment’ carried out by this account was mimicked by other Facebook and Twitter accounts (e.g., *Academic Pain*, *Research Wahlberg*)²², other users decided to approach academic online representation more critically by performing particular gender identities. Indeed, if as Butler argues, «[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender» and «identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results»²³, SAS and their offspring seem to presumptively assume male heterosexual models for thinking about sexuality in the context of Academia. These presuppositions, which reinforce the «political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality»²⁴, have given rise to counter-forms of online accounts. These users seem to respond to what Butler highlights in the following quote:

[...] precisely because certain kinds of “gender identities” fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. Their persistence and proliferation, however, provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder²⁵.

Therefore, in line with this view, many online accounts have taken on their own the aim of portraying the ‘silent’ voices of the academic community, thus offering, for example, feminist points of view (see, for instance, the case of *Dr Academic Batgirl*)²⁶ or giving voice to queer identities in Academia, which will be the focus of this contribution²⁷.

²² *Academic Pain* is only available on Twitter and their account can be reached online at <https://twitter.com/AcademicPain> (last accessed: September 28, 2016). The Twitter account of *Research Wahlberg* can be reached online at <https://twitter.com/ResearchMark> (last accessed: September 28, 2016). Their Facebook page, on the other hand, is available online at <https://www.facebook.com/researchmark/> (last accessed: September 28, 2016).

²³ J. Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, cit., p. 33.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 24.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Dr Academic Batgirl* is only available on Twitter and their account can be reached online at <https://twitter.com/AcademicBatgirl> (last accessed: September 28, 2016).

²⁷ In this paper, when we use the term Academia, we are specifically referring to Western Academia.

Grown out of the tradition established by the aforementioned social media accounts, our case study examines the recently created Twitter account *Scholarly Queen* (from now on referred to as SQ)²⁸. As the description found on their page reads, SQ presents themselves as giving a voice to «Humanities PhD with a focus on WTF did I get myself into with a sub-specialty in HEEEEEEY GIRL HEEEEEEY». The linguistic choices emerging from this very first description reveal the users the general trends that the account deals with, giving a voice to queer identity in Academia.

The case study presented here is investigated in the framework of social media discourse²⁹. In particular, the notion of engagement systems on social media platforms will be used to retrace the representation of the in-group language employed by SQ in performing an academic gendered identity. This will allow us to see how «users of language perform their identity within uses of language»³⁰. More specifically, this contribution will highlight, in the particular case of SQ, the way Twitter users perform relational identities as they enact discourse fellowships³¹.

At the same time, due to the crucial role played by the numerous images discursively used to perform this queer academic identity, a recently developed theory of multimodal analysis will be applied to investigate the multimodal prosody³² constructed in SQ.

²⁸ *Scholarly Queen* is only available on Twitter and their account can be reached online at <https://twitter.com/ScholarlyWERK> (last accessed: September 28, 2016). The account was created on June 1, 2016 and at the time of writing (October 4, 2016), SQ has 71 followers. This means that the account has a limited audience since, as we will see in the following sections, it addresses a specific community. Additionally, we must also highlight that, given the ‘ephemeral’ nature of the web, this account may cease to be active, may be deleted or disappear from Twitter at any time in the near future.

²⁹ Susan C. Herring, *Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Behavior*, in Sasha A. Barab, Rob Kling and James H. Gray (Eds), *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 338-376; Jannis Androutsopoulos, *Potentials and Limitations of Discourse-Centred Online Ethnography*, in Jannis Androutsopoulos and Michael Beißwenger (Eds), *Data and Methods in Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis*, Special Issue of *Language@Internet* 5, 2008, available online at <http://www.languageatinternet.org/articles/2008/1610> (last accessed: September 28, 2016); M. Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and social media: How we use language to create affiliation on the web*, cit.; M. Zappavigna, *Enacting identity in microblogging through ambient affiliation*, cit.

³⁰ James R. Martin, Michele Zappavigna, Paul Dwyer and Chris Cléirigh, *Users in uses of language: Embodied identity in youth justice conferencing*, in «Text and Talk», 33, 2013, p. 468.

³¹ M. Zappavigna, *Enacting identity in microblogging through ambient affiliation*, cit.

³² Giuseppe Balirano, *Who’s afraid of Conchita Wurst? Drag Performers and the Construction of Multimodal Prosody*, in Maria Grazia Sindoni, Janina Wildfeuer and Kay L. O’Halloran (Eds), *Mapping Multimodal Performance Studies*, London/New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 154-179.

2. Twitter and social media

Since the focus of this contribution is mainly placed on social media and, more specifically, on Twitter, in the following sections, we will briefly introduce an overview of this social networking platform and, more broadly, of social media.

2.1 *The social web*

The advent of the Web 2.0 (also referred to as the social web)³³ has marked a shift «toward the internet as an interpersonal resource rather than solely an informational network»³⁴. Therefore, microblogging activities are seen as establishing a social relationship rather than only providing information, even though the two are strictly interconnected. In fact, given information presented as forms of synthetic effects on people can still be used to enact these relationships, thus, creating forms of ‘networking’ among users of the social web.

According to Hsu and Park³⁵, microblogging activities can be defined as written contributions dynamically recorded on specific online platforms that can be accessed through different kinds of media and that are, sometimes, publicly created and shared with everyone. These contributions can be regarded as ‘user-generated contents’, meaning that they can be seen as:

[...] *self-publication* by users of multimedia content such as blogs (websites displaying entries in reverse chronological order), vlogs (video blogs such as those posted regularly by millions of users on YouTube) and microblogs (streams of small character-constrained posts)³⁶.

³³ The social web can be seen as a space of freedom, where connections among users can be established. However, we must also underline the fact that these connections are sometimes the result of practices of users’ profiling (B. Krulwich, *Lifestyle Finder: Intelligent User Profiling Using Large-Scale Demographic Data*, in «AI Magazine», 18, 2, 1997, pp. 37–46), according to which relationships are enabled in line with users’ shared interests in given goods, products, online pages, and so on.

³⁴ M. Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and social media: How we use language to create affiliation on the web*, cit., p. 2.

³⁵ Chien-leng Hsu and Han Woo Park, *Sociology of Hyperlink Networks of Web 1.0, Web 2.0, and Twitter: A Case Study of South Korea*, in «Social Science Computer Review», 29, 3, 2011, pp. 354–368.

³⁶ M. Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and social media: How we use language to create affiliation on the web*, cit., p. 2 (emphasis added).

The concept of ‘self-publication’³⁷ or ‘self-presentation’³⁸ is particularly clear in one of the most frequently used forms of social media, that is, social networking services (SNSs). As Papacharissi highlights:

SNSs provide props that facilitate self-presentation, including text, photographs, and other multimedia capabilities, but the performance is centered around public displays of social connections or friends, which are used to authenticate identity and introduce the self through the reflexive process of fluid association with social circles. Thus, individual and collective identities are simultaneously presented and promoted³⁹.

In this sense, while in everyday communication the interplay of embodied interactions between language, bodies, and other elements of context is taken for granted, «mediated conversations require individuals to write themselves into being»⁴⁰.

2.2 *Introducing Twitter*

Twitter is an online social networking service created in March 2006 and officially launched in July 2006, by Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams (who are currently part of the Board of Directors), Biz Stone and Noah Glass. The company’s headquarter is based in San Francisco, but offices are spread all over the world. This online platform enables users to send and read ‘tweets’, that is, short messages that are comprised of up to a maximum of 140 characters. As Kwak *et al.* explain:

Twitter users follow others or are followed. Unlike on most online social networking sites, [...] the relationship of following and being followed requires no reciprocation. A user can follow any other user, and the user being followed need not follow back⁴¹.

³⁷ M. Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and social media: How we use language to create affiliation on the web*, cit.

³⁸ Zizi Papacharissi, *A Networked Self: Identity Performance and Sociability on Social Network Sites*, in Francis L. Lee, Louis Leung, Jack Linchuan Qiu and Donna Chu (Eds), *Frontiers in New Media Research*, New York, Routledge, 2013, pp. 207-221.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 209.

⁴⁰ Danah Boyd and Jeffrey Heer, *Profiles as conversation: Networked identity performance on Friendster*, in *Proceedings of the 39th Hawai’i International Conference on System Sciences, January 4-7*, Los Alamitos, CA, IEEE Press, 2006.

⁴¹ Haewoon Kwak, Changhyun Lee, Hosung Park and Sue Moon, *What is Twitter, a social network or a news media?*, in *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on World Wide Web, April 26-30*, 2010, p. 591.

Twitter can be accessed through its website interface or mobile device app. According to its official website⁴², it is currently used by 313 million people, with more than forty languages supported and one billion unique accesses per month. Topics addressed on Twitter may vary from the most frivolous (e.g., commenting on given TV shows) to the most serious ones (e.g., discussing political events or announcing breaking news stories). It is possible to group tweets together by topic or type through the use of ‘hashtags’, that is, keywords or representative words preceded by the symbol #; while by using the symbol @, the tweet will be directly linked to specific users/accounts. Another feature of this platform is represented by the possibility to ‘retweet’ tweets posted by other users.

According to Java *et al.*⁴³, users of Twitter mainly use this social network to talk about daily life events, conversations, share or seek information, and report news stories. In fact, Twitter «[...] can help produce ‘ambient affiliation’ when people use hashtags to attach themselves to a conversation for a moment in time» producing «*ad hoc* publics» through the creation of «hashtag communities»⁴⁴.

3. The construction of online identities and gendered voices

SNSs can also be seen as means through which traditional power relationships can be challenged by playing on the niche audience they want to attract. As KhosraviNik and Unger maintain:

Optimistically speaking, social media have now helped to decentralize the mass-mediated processes of pushing content onto audiences and offer some kind of participatory role to the individual communicator. By making access to the processes of production and distribution of texts possible, the locations of communicative power concentration ‘are

⁴² Further information on Twitter can be found online at <https://about.twitter.com/company> (last accessed: September 28, 2016).

⁴³ Akshay Java, Xiaodan Song, Tim Finin and Belle Tseng, *Why We Twitter: Understanding microblogging usage and communities*, in *Proceedings of the 9th WebKDD and 1st SNA-KDD 2007 workshop on Web mining and social network analysis. August 12*, San Jose, California, ACM, 2007, pp. 56-65.

⁴⁴ Emily R. Wills, André Fecteau, *Humor and Identity on Twitter: #muslimcandyheartrejects as a Digital Space for Identity Costruction*, in «Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs», 36, 1, 2016, p. 33.

unfixed and shift according to the contextual environments⁴⁵, and such spaces for resistant discourses are not only afforded but taken up and used effectively [...]⁴⁶.

Therefore, SNSs have opened up new alleys for dissonant discourses to take form and, more specifically, for divergent identities to have their voices represented. Indeed, if «[s]ocial media can help to bring into being new practices of social inclusivity, group recognition and pluralized participation as well as different forms of political conversation and engagement»⁴⁷, this also means that community identity representations can pave the way to «the construction and representation of a variety of non-mainstream identities which can be seen as the democratization of information and culture»⁴⁸.

Thus, as previously mentioned, SNSs have recently seen the rise of a series of accounts where the hegemonic male heteronormative representation of Academia is challenged. The Twitter account *Dr Academic Batgirl*, for instance, was created to offer a feminist take on the academic world, thus, highlighting chauvinistic discourses found in this context through forms of community self-disclosure⁴⁹.

Gender inequality, as van den Brink and Benschop⁵⁰ investigate in their empirical study, seems to represent an unbeatable seven-headed beast, «regardless of the variation in the history of higher education in different countries and regardless, too, of their varying equality policies»⁵¹. While the ‘academic gender gap’ has diminished considerably in the last decades,

⁴⁵ Darren Kelsey and Lucy Bennett, *Discipline and Resistance on Social Media: Discourse, Power and Context in the Paul Chambers ‘Twitter Joke Trial’*, in «Discourse, Context and Media», 3, 2014, p. 43.

⁴⁶ Majid KhosraviNik and Johann W. Unger, *Critical Discourse Studies and Social Media: Power, Resistance and Critique in Changing Media Ecologies*, in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (3rd Edn.), London, Sage, 2016, p. 211.

⁴⁷ Simon Cottle, *Media and the Arab uprisings of 2011: Research notes*, in «Journalism», 12, 2011, p. 651.

⁴⁸ M. KhosraviNik and J.W. Unger, *Critical Discourse Studies and Social Media: Power, Resistance and Critique in Changing Media Ecologies*, cit., p. 211.

⁴⁹ The case of Sarah Ahmed’s (Goldsmith University of London) resignations in protest against the failure to address the problem of sexual harassment in Academia is an example of the fight against chauvinistic practices in the university context. Further details can be found on her blog (<https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/05/30/resignation/>; last accessed: October 4, 2016).

⁵⁰ Marieke van den Brink and Yvonne Benschop, *Slaying the Seven-Headed Dragon: The Quest for Gender Change in Academia*, in «Gender, Work and Organization», 19, 1, 2012, pp. 71-92.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 71.

it persists in universities, particularly in the ‘senior’ ranks of Academia⁵². This means that women are still underrepresented in this context. Therefore, if «communication on SNS can extend from the most mundane, local, private and personal forms of communication to communication that can have the most serious collective, political, financial and cultural significance»⁵³, accounts such as *Dr Academic Batgirl* seem to function as a critical networked identity. Indeed, thanks to these accounts, hegemonic discourses are uncovered, fought and/or challenged through forms of self-disclosures, enabling processes of identification in highlighting forms of discrimination and under-representation women experience in the academic world. These online minority identities, thus, offer forms of empowerment to users by denouncing what they face daily in the real-life context of Academia.

Gender inequality in Academia also affects minority groups such as the one represented by LGBTIQ+ people⁵⁴. As Bilimoria and Stewart⁵⁵ highlight, there seems to be a small amount of literature focused particularly on forms of discrimination in the academic workplace in the case of LGBTIQ+ people, something that may be seen as already indicative of the fact that this may not yet be perceived as an issue that should be addressed. What little can be found on this topic⁵⁶ highlights the conflicting dichot-

⁵² David Knights and Wendy Richards, *Sex Discrimination in UK Academia*, in «Gender, Work & Organization», 10, 2, 2003, pp. 213-238; Maureen Baker, *Gendered families, academic work and the ‘motherhood penalty’*, in «Women’s Studies Journal», 26, 1, 2012, pp. 11-24.

⁵³ M. KhosraviNik and J.W. Unger, *Critical Discourse Studies and Social Media: Power, Resistance and Critique in Changing Media Ecologies*, cit., p. 209.

⁵⁴ The acronym LGBTIQ+ is generally used to refer to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexual, and Questioning community. The plus at the end of this acronym is used to include other groups relating to non-conforming sexual orientation and gender identity, such as the Asexual, Non-Binary, Pansexual, Genderqueer, etc. communities. No form of disrespect or erasure is intended here in not using other types of initialisms or terms appropriate to different languages and cultures. The authors have adopted the acronym LGBTIQ+ because they feel it represents the most inclusive, concise and comprehensive way to refer to this ever-growing community.

⁵⁵ Diana Bilimoria and Abigail J. Stewart, “*Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell*”: *The Academic Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Faculty in Science and Engineering*, in «NWSA Journal», 21, 2, 2009, pp. 85-103.

⁵⁶ Louie Crew, *The Gay Academic*, Palm Springs, CA, ETC Publications, 1978; John Gagnon, Suzanne Keller, Ronald Lawson, Patricia Miller, William Simon and Joan Huber, *Report of the American Sociological Association’s Task Group on Homosexuality*, in «The American Sociologist», 17, 1982, pp. 164-180; Verta Taylor and N.C. Raeburn, *Identity Politics as High-Risk Activism: Career Consequences for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Sociologists*, in «Social Problems», 42, 2, 1995, pp. 252-273; Toni A.H. McNaron, *Poisoned Ivy: Lesbian and Gay Faculty Confronting Homophobia*, Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 1997; BeckyJ. Liddle, Mark A. Kunkel, Sherry L. Kick and Anita L. Hauenstein, *The Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Psychology Faculty Expe-*

omy between the increasing promotion of inclusive policies in universities and «the everyday slights, harassment, intimidation, fears, exclusion, and discrimination experienced by LGBT faculty»⁵⁷. This entails that, while new policies are increasingly being adopted, social stigma linked to LGBTIQ+ people is still present in Academia. This explains why some scholars may feel the pressure to ‘cover’ their sexual orientation or gender identity⁵⁸ by ‘fitting’ into the mainstream, binary heterosexual matrix⁵⁹. Yoshino⁶⁰ links this demand of ‘covering’ to Goffman’s⁶¹ social responses to social stigma. In this sense, «the majority’s implicit demand to “cover” one’s identity [...] constrains the full personhood of minority group members’ self-expression, and for that reason is experienced as deeply painful over time»⁶².

As previously seen, in such a context, SNSs offer the opportunity for these non-mainstream identities to find their own place to see themselves represented and find forms of self-expression. Therefore, they become online ambient and identity affiliation systems⁶³, where groups of people can reunite under the discursive representations of their collocative values associated with the specific ‘signs’ pointing toward their in-group commu-

rience, in «Teaching of Psychology», 25, 1, 1998, pp. 19-25; James T. Sears, *The Institutional Climate for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Education Faculty: What Is the Pivotal Frame of Reference?*, in «Journal of Homosexuality», 43, 1, 2002, pp. 11-37; Kerry W. Noack, *An Assessment of the Campus Climate for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Persons as Perceived by the Faculty, Staff and Administration at Texas A&M University* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation), Texas, USA, A&M University, 2004; Michael C. LaSala, David A. Jenkins, Darrel P. Wheeler and Karen I. Fredriksen-Goldsen, *LGBT Faculty, Research, and Researchers: Risks and Rewards*, in «Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services», 20, 3, 2008, pp. 253-267; D. Bilimoria and A.J. Stewart, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”: *The Academic Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Faculty in Science and Engineering*, cit., pp. 85-103, Ilaria Boncori (Ed.), *LGBT+Perspectives: The University of Essex Reader*, Naples, Editoriale Scientifica, 2017 (forthcoming).

⁵⁷ D. Bilimoria and A.J. Stewart, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”: *The Academic Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Faculty in Science and Engineering*, cit., p. 86.

⁵⁸ Kenji Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*, New York, Random House, 2006.

⁵⁹ D. Bilimoria and A.J. Stewart, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”: *The Academic Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Faculty in Science and Engineering*, cit.

⁶⁰ K. Yoshino, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*, cit.

⁶¹ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identities*, Englewood-Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1963.

⁶² D. Bilimoria and A.J. Stewart, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”: *The Academic Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Faculty in Science and Engineering*, cit., p. 91.

⁶³ M. Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and social media: How we use language to create affiliation on the web*, cit.; M. Zappavigna, *Enacting identity in microblogging through ambient affiliation*, cit.

nity representation. These constructed identities, thanks to their anonymity, can therefore give life to forms of counter-discourses, fighting against the hegemonic male heteronormativity of Academia, where heterosexuality may be routinely assumed. In this sense, SQ functions as both an online ambient and identity affiliation platform, and also as a dispositive through which forms of heterosexism, heterocentrism, homophobia, and more broadly, hostility within and outside of social work programmes in Academia are challenged and fought.

3.1 *The use of humour in the construction of Twitter identities*

In building this particular representation, another type of linguistic strategy comes in hand in SQ's Twitter profile: humour. In fact, as posited by Vine *et al.*:

Humor is a means of creating, maintaining and reinforcing facets of an individual's social identity, and it is also a means of constructing and sustaining membership of particular workplace teams, and communities of practice, and reinforcing particular cultural values⁶⁴.

As a matter of fact, humour can be considered a constructive instrument to utilize in building a 'positive identity' in contexts where the main actors are part of a less powerful group. In this way, it becomes a useful means to «subvert the pervasive influence of the dominant group by testing, stretching and contesting normative boundaries»⁶⁵. The type of humour used in SQ clings onto the cultural references related to the 'queer in-group' identity affiliation system, while assigning, at the same time, a great role to black humour as well by using as main actors of their tweets black people, drag queens, and non-binary, gender non-conforming identities.

Laughter in SQ also acts upon the most known Relief Theory and Incongruity Theory of humour⁶⁶. In fact, with reference to Relief Theory,

⁶⁴ Bernadette Vine, Susan Kell, Meredith Marra and Jant Holmes, *Boundary-marking humor: Institutional, gender and ethnic demarcation in the workplace*, in Neil R. Norrick and Delia Chiaro (Eds), *Humor in Interaction*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009, p. 137.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 125.

⁶⁶ Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter; S. Attardo, *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatics Analysis*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter; Viktor Raskin, *Roundtable on scripts/frame semantics*, in «Special Issue of Quaderni di Semantica», 6, 2, 1985.

according to which mirth is created through the use of puns related to a topic that might generate tension, the GIFs⁶⁷ and other images used in SQ's tweets offer a humorous and, at times, exaggerated and whimsical representation of that queer identity that creates tension when performed in Academia. On the other hand, humour in SQ can also be related to Incongruity Theory that, simply put, plays on opposite and incongruent representations, such as the queer identity depicted in SQ, which can be seen as incongruent to the stereotyped expectations that society has set as a standard for the representation of the typical academic.

4. Methodology and Theoretical framework

In the following section, some of the methodologies and theoretical frameworks adopted in this contribution in order to analyse the corpus under investigation are discussed.

4.1 *Introducing multimodal prosody*

«Identity is the social positioning of self and other», Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall⁶⁸ posit in a chapter written in 2010 titled *Locating Identity in Language*. In fact, as the purpose of this research is to analyse the identity construction of academics from a queer point of view, this study can be placed in a multifaceted, interdisciplinary, multi-approach framework.

As «identity does not emerge at a single analytical level – whether vowel quality, turn shape, code choice or ideological structure – but operates at multiple levels simultaneously»⁶⁹, the aspect of multimodality will be taken into consideration, namely the concept of multimodal prosody⁷⁰ will be applied for the analysis of the corpus under scrutiny.

Multimodal prosody arises from the concept of semantic prosody, elaborated by Sinclair,⁷¹ and later further investigated by other scholars such

⁶⁷ The term 'GIF' stands for Graphics Interchange Format bitmap images that also support animation.

⁶⁸ Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, *Locating identity in language*, in Carmen Llamas and Dominique Watt (Eds), *Language and Identities*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 18.

⁶⁹ *Ivi*, p. 19.

⁷⁰ G. Balirano, *Who's afraid of Conchita Wurst? Drag Performers and the Construction of Multimodal Prosody*, cit.

⁷¹ John Sinclair (Ed.), *Looking up*, London, Collins COBUILD, 1987.

as Partington⁷², Hoey⁷³ and Louw⁷⁴ – among others. Semantic prosody is a concept that stems from the field of Corpus Linguistics. Indeed, in analysing corpora, some scholars noticed that given words tended to occur in recurring sequences, and this repetition was found to influence the reader of the text with a positive or negative unit of meaning. Putting it more simply, the mind of the reader ‘gets used’ to a particular concept associated with a specific word, and viceversa expressed negatively or positively, therefore, it will be more likely that the same reader will again associate that word with that concept in a different context. As with semantic prosody, also multimodal prosody relies on readers/viewers’ repetitive exposure to specific prosodies entailed in images. As Balirano maintains:

Multimodal Prosody refers to the observed effect by which individuals, who are exposed to complex multimodal co-deployments, subsequently notice more of the positive or negative features of the world than they would otherwise, according to the way the priming semiotic resources co/occur with certain other resources, in certain kinds of context⁷⁵.

Images are an important aspect of the corpus under scrutiny as they are used as a primary source of interaction. Together with words, they contribute to the construction of a queer identity in the Twitter account under investigation.

4.2 *Discourse fellowship and discourse-centred online ethnography*

As for the analysis of lexical choices in the representation of SQ, the qualitative methodology adopted here is multifaceted and, more specifically, approaches the analysis of this account from the generalised discursive choices used to create discourse fellowship⁷⁶. Moreover, since the

⁷² Alan Partington, *Patterns and Meanings: Using Corpora for English Language Research and Teaching*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1998.

⁷³ Micheal Hoey, *Some text properties of certain nouns*, in Tony McEnery and Simon Botley (Eds), *Proceedings of the Colloquium on Discourse Anaphora and Reference Resolution*, Lancaster, University of Lancaster, 1998.

⁷⁴ Bill Louw, *Irony in the text or insincerity in the writer? The diagnostic potential of semantic prosodies*, in Mona Baker, Guy Francis and Elena Tognini-Bonelli (Eds), *Text and Technology: In Honour of John Sinclair*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1993, pp. 157-176.

⁷⁵ G. Balirano, *Who’s afraid of Conchita Wurst? Drag Performers and the Construction of Multimodal Prosody*, cit.

⁷⁶ M. Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and social media: How we use language to create*

purpose of this account is to represent queer identities in Academia, our approach also wants to highlight ideology issues found and/or linked to the representation of this community. Thus, from a theoretical point of view, our approach both combines Androutsopoulos's⁷⁷ Discourse-Centred Online Ethnography (DCOE) and Herring's⁷⁸ Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). While the former offers practice-oriented guidelines in order to observe how relationships and processes are enacted in the online environment by looking at «the social meaning of different ways of using language by taking into account participants' awareness and interpretation of their practices, and by relating language to the social categories and activities of a community»⁷⁹, Herring's⁸⁰ approach provides «a theoretical lens, alongside critical discourse studies, to examine issues and specific linguistic (or semiotic) phenomena»⁸¹.

5. Data collection and analysis

As previously highlighted, our case study focuses on a specific Twitter account, *Scholarly Queen*, during their first month of activity (from June 1, 2016 to June 30, 2016). The account is publicly available on Twitter by searching for @ScholarlyWERK.

In order to collect all the data activities of this account, we have decided to use the Advanced Search tool⁸² available on Twitter, which allows users to search for specific accounts, hashtags, tweets, etc., in a given language and on specific topics. After specifying the Twitter account we wanted to find and limiting the results to the time span previously mentioned, we

affiliation on the web, cit.; M. Zappavigna, *Enacting identity in microblogging through ambient affiliation*, cit.

⁷⁷ J. Androutsopoulos, *Potentials and Limitations of Discourse-Centred Online Ethnography*, cit.

⁷⁸ S.C. Herring, *Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Behavior*, cit.

⁷⁹ J. Androutsopoulos, *Potentials and Limitations of Discourse-Centred Online Ethnography*, cit.

⁸⁰ S.C. Herring, *Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Behavior*, cit.

⁸¹ M. KhosraviNik and J.W. Unger, *Critical Discourse Studies and Social Media: Power, Resistance and Critique in Changing Media Ecologies*, cit., p. 216.

⁸² Twitter's Advanced Search tool can be accessed online at <https://twitter.com/search-advanced> (last accessed: September 28, 2016).

accessed the live tweet stream by SQ and saved the page in HTML format. We, then used the freeware HTMLAsText⁸³ in order to convert the file in a.txt format. This procedure allowed us to create the *Scholarly Queen* Corpus (SQUEEC), which we used to investigate the tweets by SQ linguistically. The corpus thus collected contains 97 tweets and ten replies published by SQ.

The corpus collection methodology adopted here, however, did not allow us to automatically collect also the images and GIFs posted by SQ. In order to collect them, we manually downloaded the images and GIFs posted by SQ and tagged them in accordance with the tweets they were used in. This allowed us to simultaneously perform a textual and multimodal analysis of the tweets collected from SQ. Overall, the SQUEEC contains 92 GIFs and ten images (while only five tweets were not accompanied by any form of multimodal text).

Thus, from the corpus collection, we already notice something peculiar in the way SQ constructs their online identity and ‘feeds’ their online audience. Indeed, it seems that textual elements are generally accompanied and/or implemented by visual elements (in the case of the five tweets that did not include any multimodal text, they were all replies to other users’ tweets), while hashtags were only used five times. We highlight this because, while Zappavigna⁸⁴ underlines that one of the most frequently used forms of ambient affiliation device is represented by the use of hashtags, in SQ images are used to fulfil this function. Thus, it seems only logical that when replying to other users’ tweets, SQ does not use images, since replies represent responses to others’ identity construction cues and, therefore, they are not actually part of the process of the identity affiliation system enabled by SQ.

In the next sections, we will further investigate how this Twitter account constructs their ambient affiliation system, starting with a quick overview of the most peculiar generalisations made from a lexical investigation of the SQUEEC.

5.1 *Lexical choices in the SQUEEC*

⁸³ Nir Sofer, *HTMLAsText* (v1.11) [software], 2009, available online at <http://www.nirsoft.net/utills/htmlastext.html> (last accessed: September 28, 2016).

⁸⁴ M. Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and social media: How we use language to create affiliation on the web*, cit.

From a structural point of view, the tweets found on SQ comprise two main categories. The first one (see Figure 1) and the most prominently used in our corpus is represented by tweets where a conversation is simulated between fictitious people in a position of power (interview committee, Doctoral defence committee, senior professors, administrative staff, search committee, students, etc.)⁸⁵ and the response of a fictitious persona that identifies themselves as queer. The response/reaction is generally represented multimodally in the GIFs/images that accompany the tweet:



Fig. 1: An example taken from the SQUEEC (June 6, 2016) of a simulated conversation with a multimodal text used as a response. The GIF shows Shangela Laquifa Wadley, a former contestant on *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Season 2 and Season 3), in her music video *Werqin' Girl*.

The response can either be represented in the closed captions of the featured GIFs/images or by simply using a GIF/image entailing a specific facial expression/reaction.

The second category of tweets used by SQ (see Figure 2) is represented by sentences describing a given academic situation (conference attendance, printing the final draft of the dissertation, papers' revision process, faculty meetings, etc.) and directly followed by a GIF/picture representing how that particular situation is perceived in the eye of a queer person:

⁸⁵ Students are seen as people in a position of power since, with the increasingly commodification of knowledge, universities are seen as offering given «goods» to their «clients».


 **Scholarly Queen** @ScholarlyWERK · Jun 12
When students have a group assignment and every member comes to your office to complain about the the the others.



Fig. 2: An example taken from the SQUEEC (June 12, 2016) of a simulated situation with a multimodal text used as a response. The picture shows Latrice Royale, a former contestant on *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Season 4), during one of her first appearances on the show (Season 4, Episode 1; January 30, 2012).

As we will see in the multimodal analysis, the lexical choices displayed in the textual elements of the tweets (whether they are part of the tweet itself or embedded in the GIF/image) are strictly linked to the drag queen lingo. Figure 2, for instance, sees the use of the term 'shade', which is used in 'dragqueenese' to describe a behaviour (whether expressed through words or physically) that is perceived as disrespectful towards another person. As the Merriam-Webster Dictionary online explains, 'throwing shades' «[...] has been a part of the American black experience since slavery, when a direct insult could result in death»⁸⁶. However, the very first modern occurrence of this term was recorded in the drag queen documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), where it is expressly used to describe the activity of insulting others.

⁸⁶ Merriam-Webster Online, *What Does 'Throw Shade' Mean?*, in «Words We're Watching», 2016, available online at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/shade> (last accessed: September 28, 2016).

Other examples of terms belonging to the queer or drag queen community are represented by words such as ‘yas’, ‘werk’, ‘fierce’, ‘girrrl’, etc.

However, next to the queer/queen representation of the perception of given academic situations, we must also highlight the use of lexical choices defining the identity represented in SQ not only as queer but also as a voice representative of another minority, that is, the Afro-American culture. In this sense, the voice of the ‘straight white male’ is always opposed to the voice of SQ, who embodies a black queer identity:



Fig. 3: An example taken from the SQUEEC (June 23, 2016) of the opposition between the voice of the ‘straight white male’ and the black queer identity. The picture shows Nicole Richie starring in her American reality television series *Candidly Nicole* (July 17, 2014 – present).

As we have briefly seen from the most important generalisations that we have drawn from lexically analysing SQ, various strategies are adopted to present this identity and create a sense of community.

In the next section, we will further investigate some of the observations offered here through a multimodal analysis of the tweets in the SQUEEC.

5.2 Multimodal analysis

As already mentioned, visual elements play a very important role in the data collected. Television shows and films are the source of all the images and GIFs that usually accompany the textual elements in SQ. A great number of the GIFs (33 out of the total) and two images are taken from the TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (see Figure 2), an American reality show that features the renowned drag queen RuPaul in her quest to finding America's next drag queen superstar. Other images/GIFs feature ex-contestants of the TV show but, in these cases, these elements are not taken from any episodes of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (see Figure 1). A consistent part of the GIFs (i.e., ten out of the total) was taken from the reality show *Candidly Nicole* (see Figure 3), in which Nicole Richie talks about her everyday life. Some GIFs and images are taken from other shows, such as the TV series *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (March 6, 2015 – present), or the animated Disney film *Tarzan* (1999); others simply display famous singers, such as Britney Spears or Mariah Carey, during live performances or interviews.

The GIFs and images mostly represent women or drag queens: only eleven out of the total depict a male character, which in most cases is either the gay character of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, Titus Andromedon, or *RuPaul's Drag Race's* drag queens when they are out of drag, faithful to the queer representation that SQ intends to portray, from the very first choice of their profile photo. Another aspect to pinpoint is that there is a wide presence of diverse ethnicities, once again underlining SQ's commitment to giving voice to those groups in society that are usually seen as minorities or less powerful.

As stated by Jou, Bhattacharya and Chang, «GIFs have quickly become a channel for visually expressing emotion»⁸⁷. In the case of SQ, GIFs are used not only to express emotions, but most importantly to create a sort of community bond, that ambient affiliation mentioned earlier in this contribution, and this emerges through two different aspects. Firstly, all images are similar in the sense that they are representative of the same context:

⁸⁷ Brendan Jou, Sunhabrata Bhattacharya and Shih-Fu Chang, *Predicting viewer perceived emotions in animated GIFs*, in *Proceedings of the 22nd ACM international conference on Multimedia*, November 3–7, Orlando, Florida, ACM, 2014, p. 213.

the queen or, more generally, queer world, thus, giving a specific orientation to the topics discussed in SQ and linking the profile to queerness. As most GIFs represent a drag queen, this choice does become seminal in defining the identity portrayed by SQ. Secondly, the community bond is further created through humour. On the one hand, this re-enforces the ambient affiliation already created by the Twitter context by releasing the tension generated by the topics dealt with; while, on the other hand, the use of irony in responding to everyday problems that people working in academia must overcome, leaves the floor open to a much more forthright and unbiased form of communication.

The repeated use of images representing a queer identity, via drag queens or the other actors, primes – borrowing a term from the multimodal and semantic prosody theories – the account, and consequently the identity that SQ is trying to represent with a specific point of view, «loaded with the context and co-text in which the semiotic resource co-occurs most frequently»⁸⁸. A depiction of scholar identity that we could dare to define as a counter-representation of academics; a queer side of academia, which goes against the binary, heteronormative standardised representation expected by society. Through the use of GIFs, academic identity is represented as a performance, just like the performance enacted by drag queens and other artists represented in the GIFs.

6. Conclusions

Bucholtz and Hall⁸⁹ argue that identities and, more specifically, gender identities gain social meaning when put in relation to other social actors. SQ is a practical example of how this is done. Indeed, queer academic identities are given a chance to express themselves in a space that is specifically built on relations among social actors. In this space, voices usually considered non-conforming are finally seen as part of a group and not as outcasts. Therefore, Twitter becomes a safe-haven for non-conforming identities: a means through which communication is simplified, emboldened, and encouraged.

⁸⁸ G. Balirano, *Who's afraid of Conchita Wurst? Drag Performers and the Construction of Multimodal Prosody*, cit.

⁸⁹ M. Bucholtz and K. Hall, *Locating identity in language*, in C. Llamas and D. Watt (Eds), *Language and Identities*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, pp. 18-28.

In light of the analysis described in the previous sections, a double set of conclusions on how gender identity is performed, represented, and presented in SQ, may be drawn.

Against this backdrop, in a way, SQ acts as a rebellious counter-hegemonic, non-conforming discursive mechanism, through which it enacts a sort of fight against hegemonic, binary and heteronormative discourses and representations found in Academia. Starting from the assumption that sexual identity and gender identity are performed in Academia following the bi-standards established by society, according to which higher positions of power are given to men, while lower power positions to women⁹⁰, the identity performed in Academia by academics must conform to the heteronormative take on society in order to be accepted. Those who do not conform to the abovementioned ideologies are less likely to fit in this environment. SQ criticises this kind of representation, by mocking it or performing it through irony.

At the same time, SQ construes a particular take on personal identity of academics, in a way comparing them to (drag)queens. In fact, academics perform an identity (i.e., strict teacher, unsympathetic researcher) at work that is not their real identity just as drag queens perform an identity on stage that is not their identity. However, while the identity performed by drag queens is a work of art that gives life to their representation of femininity, in Academia, queer academics are not necessarily free to perform their inner personas. SQ gives voice to that inner representation of the self that does not identify with the heteronormative, binary system of representation that society imposes, but creates a (parallel) space in which that presentation is possible. In fact, the aspect of anonymity provided by the social network is a pivotal element of this representation, as ideas, feelings or thoughts, which can be hard to express out loud, can be freely externalized. The very owner of SQ's Twitter profile, whom we know nothing about, represents the first example of this phenomenon.

In conclusion, Twitter and social media, in general, have become the place where people and, more specifically, academics, are free to represent their own identity, the way they like it the most, without being judged or biased.

⁹⁰ Antonella Liccardo, Maria Carmela Agodi, Angela Gargano, Maria Rosaria Masullo, Ilenia Picardi and Ofelia Pisanti, *Primo Bilancio di Genere dell'Ateneo Fridericiano*, Napoli, FedOA-Press, 2016.