"A Virtual Canvas"—Designing a Blog Site to Research Young Muslims' Friendships & Identities

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Abstract: This article is based on research among a group of Muslim youth living in the west of Ireland as part of a study on "social belonging" and identity. One part of the research involved designing a youth centered, participatory research method, in the form of a blog site, to investigate what young people say and do when they are asked to talk about themselves and their relationships, with minimal researcher involvement. Participants were presented with a "blank virtual canvas" where they determined what became discussed. Twenty-two teenaged Muslims—comprising close friends as well as fellow students of the same school and living in the same West of Ireland town—contributed to a time limited, closed blog site over a four month period. The blog site offers interesting snippets of Muslim identification, and how they choose to present themselves to others. In the process of contributing to this exercise, we can also observe subtle means through which inclusion and exclusion co-exist online, refracting young people's offline worlds. The blog affords an opportunity to consciously "do" friendship by presenting to each other images, symbols and statements of friendship that invoke both cohesion and closure. The research unravels certain gendered patterns in online performances. In demonstrating this evidence, we argue that the study of online interactions of youth can provide an alternative window in exploring relationships, identification and social positioning.

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1. Introduction

It has been increasingly recognized in recent years that the ready availability and active use of new communication technologies and software are significantly shaping the nature of people's interactions, understandings and identities (KENNY, WHITTLE & WILLMOTT, 2011). In particular, social networking sites have come to play a crucial part and time element in youth life and studies of such activity reveal significant insight to new forms of identity making as well as

political engagements. Anita HARRIS, Johanna WYN and Salem YOUNES (2011, p.27) describe online social networking as a form of "intimate, social, unregulated youth space" where "ordinary youth" can express themselves and have a say in the public sphere, while Paul HODKINSON and Sian LINCOLN (2008) examine intersections between the privatized space of the bedroom and how young people construct online journals in ways that confer safe personal ownership and control over who/what is left in or kept out. In the latter study, young people also "carefully craft" aspects of their identity for the benefit of others, as well as demonstrating changing priorities, affiliations and shifting transitions. [1]

As these studies show, online activity presents a type of prism through which we can view aspects of identity in action. These studies indicate that studying online activity offers particular insight into the manner in which individuals locate themselves as members of a particular social group, resonating with those theorizations of identity which highlight the centrality of social belonging. ANTHIAS (2002, p.499) asserts that inquiries into identity should situate the individual in terms of "who I am," which groupings "I identify with" and which groups "I participate within." Likewise, contra to viewing identity as a fixed, essential category we seek to analyze identity as a social construction through which the identification process of the individual takes place through interactions with other individuals and is shaped by the cultural and social context of interaction (LAWLER, 2008). Individuals negotiate social membership by emphasizing particular aspects of their identities according to the context. In some contexts religious identity may come particularly to the fore while in other situations markers of ethnic identity or membership of particular social groups may be prioritized. [2]

The recent pervasiveness of online social networking in which almost all youths regularly interact with peers online has led to the online world becoming an extension of the real world (with the converse being true to a lesser extent) rather than an alternative and escape from it (BEER, 2008; LIVINGSTONE, 2008). Rather than providing a space where individuals might explore aspects of their personalities independent of a real life context, the internet provides a forum for the extension and reification of already existing social relationships. By emphasizing friendships and social relationships, young people can be seen to use the internet primarily as a stage on which to "perform" an identity which is already embedded in the context of real life social ties and their communities (BOYD, 2008). Indeed, as online interactions replicate real-life interactions, differing only by magnifying the norms and standards that characterize these interactions, they can also provide an insightful perspective into their connectedness with others and about their community contexts. [3]

While youth can be involved in a variety of blogging sites as individuals, what happens when we specifically create a blog site where young people write as a community of online users? This article is based on research that attempted this among a group of Muslim youth in Ireland as part of a broader study on identity and "social belonging" of immigrant Muslim youth. The blog site was established,

not only in order to triangulate with other methods of inquiry, but to specifically establish what young people say and do when they are asked to talk about themselves and their relationship to others in their community, with minimal researcher influence and in the absence of researcher questions. As a study in identity and social belonging, it was envisaged that the blog site would add depth to our understanding by enabling young people to reveal aspects of their identity which would be difficult to examine through more traditional methods of inquiry. Witnessing "natural" face-to-face interactions among youth is a difficult task for a researcher and in the absence of being able to document everyday encounters among youth, the blog site was designed to represent an alternative space with which to witness how youth talk about themselves and each other. The purpose was to present young Muslims with a "blank virtual canvas" upon which they determined what became aired or discussed (see also BOYD, 2008). Twenty two youth members of the Muslim Community of Ballyhaunis in County Mayo—many of whom were either friends or were known to one another—contributed, over a four month period, to a specifically designed blog site as part of a wider study of identity and social belonging. [4]

A total of 32 Muslim youth from a variety of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds were involved in the larger study. Field research, which comprised focus groups and qualitative interviews as well as the creation of the blog site, was carried out by the first-author in the local secondary school between January and April 2010. The research sample consisted of first and second generation members of the immigrant community aged between 12 and 19 years. The majority of participants were of Pakistani origin and are classified as economic migrants. As Ballyhaunis has been home to Pakistani economic migrants for almost four decades, these participants constitute an "established" presence within the Muslim community and within the town itself. The research sample also included Muslim participants who had more recently arrived in Ireland as asylum seekers from countries in Africa, South Asia and the Middle East. In our study of these online "performances," we found that young people invoke particular symbolic markers of identity and variable ways of expressing themselves to affirm their belonging and inclusion with the community of online users. The research in particular unravels some gendered patterns in how friendships are performed online. What is left in and out of their modes of expression provides insight to uneven restrictions facing girls who perform friendship solidarity in a comfortable, emotive style while male youth adopt more distance and props in their presentations of themselves. In identifying some of the ways that senses of belonging and processes of identification are staged and forged, we can also observe subtle means through which inclusion and exclusion co-exist, particularly between the "established" majority Pakistani users and the "newcomer" asylum seeker Muslim youth. In demonstrating this evidence, the article seeks to argue that the study of online interactions of youth can provide an alternative window in exploring aspects of friendships, relationships, social identification and social positioning, especially where youth are given the opportunity to develop this blank virtual canvas for themselves. As a research tool, we believe that in addition to conventional methods, the creation of an online community of users helps

capture alternative perspectives and can shine a stronger light on complex areas of investigation such as identity. [5]

Before outlining the underlying theoretical position through which online performance is examined, more details of the research study are presented in the next section. [6]

2. Research Study—Background, Aims and Methods

The subject community of this study is the Muslim community of Ballyhaunis, a small rural town in east County Mayo on the western coast of Ireland. The population of the District Electoral Division of Ballyhaunis is 1,700 inhabitants, while the town center has a population of fewer than 1,000 people. Ballyhaunis is one of the most demographically diverse rural towns in Ireland. The census of 2006 revealed that 36.6% of the population of the town claimed to be non-Irish national (CENTRAL STATISTICS OFFICE, 2007). This unusually high percentage of immigrants is due to three key factors: the National Center for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, which accommodates some 250 asylum seekers, is located in the town center; a large number of Eastern European immigrant workers are employed in the town and the town is home to one of the longest established immigrant populations in the state, the Ballyhaunis Muslim Community. [7]

Ballyhaunis has been home to the Muslim community of Pakistani origin since the early 1970s when a Pakistani entrepreneur purchased a local meat processing plant in order to export meat slaughtered in the *halal* manner[1]. The Muslim community grew slowly from six families in the early 1970s to 30 families by the 1990s. Ballyhaunis became the site of the first purpose-built mosque in Ireland in 1986, illustrating how well established the community had become. The population of the Ballyhaunis Muslim Community has been bolstered in recent years by Muslim members of the local asylum seeking community, due to the foundation of an asylum seekers accommodation center in the town in 2001. In 2008, the Ballyhaunis Muslim Community accounted for 20% of the population of the Ballyhaunis area and 34% of the population of the town center (CENTRAL STATISTICS OFFICE, 2006; 2008; McGARRY, 2008). As the Ballyhaunis Muslim community has grown in size and diversity, internal divisions among Muslims have appeared. The most notable of these is between the more "established" economic migrant group and "newcomer" asylum seeking members. [8]

2.1 Method

There has been a considerable increase and diversity in the ethnic, ideological and socioeconomic status among Muslims in Ireland. The discourse and debate surrounding acceptable and unacceptable forms of Islam underscore the difficult position facing Muslims in European societies (SCHARBRODT, 2011). Young

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1 The *halal* (meaning: permissible) manner indicates that, in accordance with Islamic tradition, animals should be slaughtered by deeply incising the throat upon the utterance of the Islamic prayer "In the name of Allah."

Muslims who were born in Ireland or arrived at a relatively young age are in a unique position of negotiating social identity through particular family/community socialization and the wider engagement with institutions and actors of "mainstream" Irish society. The Growing up in the Ballyhaunis Muslim Community blog site was set up as part of a wider study to examine how these young Muslims engage in identity work at home, at school and within the wider community, with the intention of providing a space for youth to "present" themselves and communicate identities through what is becoming an increasingly pervasive form of interaction. [9]

Unlike other forms of social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, the blog site was specifically designed for the sample of youth, some of whom were existing friends while others were students in the same school but not close friends. The purpose was to provide research participants with a space to engage with other Muslim youth and to offer insights on their own lives; however they wished to reveal these. The approach taken here was cognizant that youth research is often hindered by the power inequalities between the researcher and research participants. Younger research participants are often uncomfortable and subject to leading by the researcher in traditional adult-oriented research scenarios (ROBERTS, 2000). It was felt that blogging provides a research tool which capitalizes on the central role played by digital media in the daily lives of youths, and provides research participants with a forum from which they can appropriate, direct and engage with the research on their own terms. This blog provided research participants with an interactive community forum to express themselves through the media of text, photography and video with minimal interference from the researcher, techniques which have proven to be successful in previous youth studies (see LEYSHON, 2002; MORROW, 2001). Online identity "performances" provide an ideal forum to develop an understanding of the processes through which communities are symbolically constructed by the collective actions of individual members. The use of blogging as a research methodology is also particularly effective in overcoming the inhibitions caused by the physical presence of an adult researcher. The use of a blog site as a research method offers a unique ethnographic perspective, enabling the researcher to observe interactions without being physically present. In order to allow participants to appropriate the blog site as a forum for self-expression, the online presence of the researcher was minimized. It was however necessary for the researcher, registered as the blog site administrator, to place three posts on the blog site. A preliminary post was placed welcoming participants to the blog site and inviting them to post their own contributions. It was also necessary to encourage participants to engage with the blog site during the early stages of the project. To this end, a photograph of a controversial sporting facility, being built close to the town center at the time, was posted by the researcher, accompanied by the question: "Hey all, Just wondering what everybody thinks of this? Do you think it will help fight off the boredom in the summer or will it be too cold without a roof?" (Oars).[2] The third post placed by the researcher provided an explanation of how to invite friends and family members to visit the blog site, following a request

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2   "Oars" was the pseudonym chosen by the researcher for use in posts to the blog site.

from a participant. It was also necessary on one occasion to edit a contribution to the blog site due to racist content. [10]

Given the age of the research participants, matters of security were given extensive consideration at all stages of the online research. In the interests of participant security the growing up in the Ballyhaunis Muslim Community blog site was a closed site, and could only be viewed by research participants or individuals invited to view the site by the moderator, the first-author. Participants were also requested to use pseudonyms in their contributions. The pseudonyms chosen by participants comprised existing nicknames or abbreviations of their forenames which, while not disclosing information that would have make them identifiable to strangers (in the event of the blog site being externally accessed), allowed them to be recognizable to each other. As the blog site was a closed site and remained online only for a short duration, this did not represent a threat to their security. However given the wider, and more enduring, dissemination of publications relating to this research, it has been necessary to further anonymize data gathered from the blog site. To this end, the nicknames chosen by the participants for use on the blog site have been replaced by less readily identifiable pseudonyms throughout this article. [11]

Of the thirty two research participants invited to contribute to the blog, twenty two participants, 12 females and 10 males, actively contributed to the blog site on a regular basis while the remaining ten participants, four females and six males, simply registered as viewers. The ages of participants ranged from 13 to 19 years, the average age of contributors being 14 and a half. Of the active contributors to the blog site, 20 were of Pakistani origin with two being asylum seekers of Middle Eastern origin. In the interest of preserving the anonymity of these participants who reside in a relatively small town, details of their nationality will not be detailed in this article. While all participants are Muslim it is believed that the "established" Pakistani participants are Shii Muslims while these Middle Eastern "newcomer" asylum seeking participants are Sunni Muslims. However, these distinctions were not raised or discussed by participants during any stage of the research. The participants who registered as viewers without actively contributing to the site were of diverse origins, six were "newcomer" asylum seekers and four were "established" economic migrants of Middle Eastern and Pakistani origin.[3] Consent was sought and provided by parents and the study was granted approval by the University's Research Ethics Committee once it was satisfied that safeguards around potentially problematic areas were adequately addressed. [12]

The blog site received an enthusiastic response from research participants between February and July 2010. Contributions to the blog were monitored on a daily basis during this period. Interest in the blog site declined during the summer months, and contributions became less frequent. The blog was removed from the

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3   The terms "newcomer" and "established" are not terms used by the youth but by us to categorize the more general distinction that is notable in the community in recent years as more asylum seekers have been accommodated in this town and in other towns/cities throughout Ireland. The research illustrates that these distinctions do in fact translate into the patterns of interaction we observed and documented in this article.

web in November 2010 after it had been inactive for a period of three months (this being one of the pre-requisites of ethical approval for the research). The blog consisted of a main page, where research participants could contribute individual "posts" consisting of text, photographs, videos, or a combination of these. Participants could then contribute "comments" to these posts which led in many cases to discussions on certain posts. Participants were also invited to create individual profiles which could be accessed from a link on the main page. Over the four months during which the blog was active, 14 research participants created personal profile pages and the main page of the site received 49 posts of varying lengths and 72 comments. For analytical purposes the posts are categorized as either auto-biographical text posts (8); photographic posts (18); interactive posts (26) and comments (72). The analysis affords a form of ethnographic insight into the nature of identity performances and interactions of individual participants; casting light on how solidarity, belonging and social positioning are recreated online. We next turn to our conceptualization of the connections between online activity and identity. [13]

3. Identity and Identifications

We take the position that identity is constantly developed through interactions between individuals, and so can best be understood as a process rather than as an end-point. It is through interactions with others that we come to know ourselves and to situate ourselves as members of society with particular social positions. Identity involves our "knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are etc." (JENKINS, 2008, p.12). Theorizing identity as inherently linked with social belonging, developed through interactions with others, posits it as a process that is continuously evolving and developing as the individual engages in social interactions (ANTHIAS, 2002). JENKINS (2008, p.5) argues that social theorists should refer to the concept by the use of the verb identification rather than through the noun identity in order to emphasize the processual nature of the concept. [14]

We can also find similar cues from symbolic interactionism which treats identity primarily as a social construction. The individual, referred to as the acting self, can only exist socially. The actions of the individual are shaped by interactions with other individuals, and by the social and cultural context in which the interactions take place (COOLEY, 1922). Each social context is characterized by social structures, or sets of rules and norms which guide and govern the interactions. While engaging in a social interaction, each individual is likely to act in accordance with the norms and conventions associated with the given context. The identity processes at work in the school environment are somewhat different to what happens behind closed doors in the domestic sphere. The individual is likely to present a facet of his/her identity *vis-a-vis* with these norms in order to convey a sense of belonging and to appropriate social membership. [15]

Erving GOFFMAN (1959, 1974) outlines that the actions of the individual are heavily influenced by the norms and conventions associated with the context of

the social interaction. Just as an actor may play many different roles in different theatrical productions, each individual will portray a different aspect of their identity according to the context in which they find themselves. The self is theorized as consisting of a "front-stage self" and of a "backstage self." The "backstage self" is the source of the action while the "front-stage self" is the person that is presented to the social world (GOFFMAN, 1974). The aspects of the individual's identity which may be presented as part of the "front-stage self" will be shaped according to the norms of the context of the interaction and with an inherent anticipation of how this might look to the "generalized other." GOFFMAN (1959) develops the work of earlier symbolic interactionists such as COOLEY (1922) and MEAD (1934) in theorizing the self as both a subject and an object. The self consists of an "I" and a "Me." The "I" of the self, is the subjective part of the individual's personality; "the active, responsive quality of individuals in interactions with others" (KENNY et al., 2011, p.24). The "me" is the aspect of the individual which is presented in social interactions—an object of regard—and may differ according to the context of the interaction. For GOFFMAN, this can be compared to the manner in which an actor enters into a performance. Just as an actor may play many roles, an individual has many different social selves. The social self to be manifested will be dictated by the context of the interactions in which the actor is taking part (GOFFMAN, 1959, p.30). [16]

Online activity can be viewed as a form of "front stage" activity, given that individuals can think in advance of what they write or post about themselves and others. While it is claimed there is a greater immediacy to general blogging than other text based activities especially where visitors are unknown to the blogger (REED, 2005), the nature of the blog site in our study is such that there is still potential to carefully craft what one says in interactions since individuals know one another, have time to write in a particular way, reflect on what others have to say and decide if and how they respond to particular posts. In online communications, people can engage more deliberately in deploying signs and expressions—the "given"—more so than on what is "given off," i.e. the nonverbal cues that appear natural and permeate everyday face-to-face interactions (ROBINSON, 2007, p.96). But as ROBINSON pp.104-105) asserts:

> "While the norms of online interaction may be different from their online counterparts ... the self-ing process remains the same ... The blogger presents the 'I' both through constructing the page and maintaining dialogue with other 'I's that post reactions and commentary ... The 'I' is constantly redefined as the 'me' in response to this interactional commentary." [17]

The interactional flows from bloggers and audiences are interdependent and in this way a process of "self-ing" occurs through the "collective construction of the cyber 'I' and 'me' with the cyberother" (p.105). Indeed, as HODKINSON and LONCOLN (2008, p.37) note, young people can experience a "distinct sense of co-presence" even though individuals are not physically present. When interacting with other members of a community, individuals will emphasize aspects of the "me" in anticipation of the virtual "generalized other" and in the context of symbols consistent with their community. [18]

How bloggers interact online tells us about the nature of social membership and the collective identity of the community of online users. GRISSO and WEISS (2005) reflect on the manner in which online community members monitor the behavior of fellow members and that users stated that they derived a sense of solidarity from their membership of the community. In their study of a blog site called "GURL.com" the majority of posts in the journal were expressions of sexual curiosity or of anxiety which received reassuring answers and expressions of support from other female users. This emanated largely from its status as a safe forum for users to express their sexual innocence. While most contributions were extensively responded to by other users, contravening posts received no response, and were thereby ignored and "frozen out." This process ensures the maintenance of certain norms and standards seen as essential to the overall identity of this community of users. In discouraging similar contributions, the overall identity of the GURL.com online community remained one of female innocence and curiosity (see also KENNY et al., 2011 for discussion of virtual identity). [19]

Online interactions can also reveal much about offline selves and relationships, and in this sense they are extensions from the wider context of their lives. The blog site established as part of the research presented here is somewhat different to general networking sites in that the youth are familiar, to varying extents, with the offline lives of each other and interact with one another to varying degrees in the same geographical community. Therefore, what they post and reveal in their online activity can also provide insights to the boundaries of their community lives. From the point of view of the anthropologist Adrian PEACE (2001), community belonging and boundary making can be traced in the extent to which individuals can share and contribute to collective narratives and social knowledge of one another. As he states: "The requirement here is not only knowing *what* to say, but also precisely *how* to say it, and exactly *who* to say it to. It is a question of knowing more-or-less intuitively ... what the appropriate speech act is under particular circumstances" (p.73; italics in original). While this shared knowledge is key, ideological or symbolic boundaries are of course central to community identity (COHEN, 1982, 1985) and nowhere is this more evident than in the Muslim community which constitutes a distinctive minority in Ireland; a country which has heretofore been relatively homogeneous in its religious and ethnic composition. While all social groups feature a certain level of internal difference in their individual members and sub-groups, at times this may be down-played or suppressed in the interest of providing an appearance of homogeneity and unity. Certain topics of discussion can become screened out. In reality, every community is marked by internal differences, between individuals and sub-groups (PEACE, 2001). Members know this intuitively but there are times when they can join together to perpetuate the illusion that these are of secondary importance, or simply do not matter. [20]

In light of these considerations, the question arises for us: when presented with a blank canvas upon which to strike up communication with similar others, what aspects of their personalities and identities do young people decide to reveal

about themselves, how they do it and what does it tell us about their broader
selves and their social belonging? [21]

4. Young Muslims' Online Performances and Interactions

4.1 Overarching identifiers

Communities are groups which consist of all who affiliate themselves to a
distinctive framework of symbols, despite the particular interpretations of
individual members (COHEN, 1985, 1986). On the Growing up in the Ballyhaunis
Muslim Community blog site, a number of posts begin with shared characteristics
of the participants, namely immigration and religion. By highlighting their shared
experiences of immigration and common religious identity as Muslims,
participants create and contribute to a collective narrative based on shared
experiences and a common religious identity. Religion can often be utilized as a
common identifier for community members (COHEN, 1985) and in this case,
religion was, for many contributors to the blog site, the definitive identifier of their
"me" voice. References to religious identity featured both explicitly and implicitly
in both text posts and photographic posts to the blog site. Articulating their
religious identity was an important element of self-identification for some
participants: "Well as you know im a muslim girl living in Ballyhaunis ... I was born
in Ireland so it makes me an irishmuslim [sic]" (Ujula).This post was placed on the
blog site by a second generation member of the community. Being an Irish born
member of an immigrant community the issue of recognition emerges for her.
While emphasizing her religion as a defining feature of her identity she is also
comforted in being accepted beyond her immediate community: "my irish friends
respect my religion and are not rude when i wear a scarf [hijab] in school and
outside" (Ujula). Given much of the public image tensions surrounding Islam in
Europe (SCHARBRODT, 2011), particularly wearing the hijab, this girl identifies a
substantive concern surrounding acceptance and inclusion within the majority
society. [22]

Awareness of the symbolic inter-relationship between the physical and the social
body is a central trait of adolescence. For youths, choice of dress is an essential
element in the expression of cultural and social affiliations (JAMES, 1986, p.160).
The importance of physical appearance in identity performance was clearly visible
in the treatment of religion on the Growing up in the Ballyhaunis Muslim
Community blog site. One male participant highlighted his religious identity by
posting, as his profile picture, a photograph which featured over twenty male
members of the community, all dressed in the traditional white *Shalwar Chameez*
worn on religious occasions. The religious clothing, so prominently featured in the
photograph, acts as a prop in this participant's identity performance and affirms a
sense of authenticity as a member of the community (see GOFFMAN, 1974). [23]

There are, however, particular differences between males and females in their
physical/visual representations of the "me" voice that we normally associate with
online activity. The majority of the female participants on the Growing up in the
Ballyhaunis Muslim Community blog site were not permitted by their parents to

place photographic material on the site. Nonetheless one female participant used a visual upload to convey the importance of religion to her. The visual post featured a picture of the Qur'an accompanied by the words "Proud to be a Muslim." This inability to visually display what matters to these young women in an open forum casts light on the unevenness surrounding freedom of expression around online selves for this particular community. [24]

As a common identifier, the experience of immigration was discussed in six separate posts on the blog site. In these posts, the experience of immigration is described as a transformation. The challenge of coping with the culture shock of moving to Ireland was discussed as a rite of passage in the lives of both female and male participants: "I was born in Pakistan. I came to Ireland when i was 7. didnt like it here when i came but now i love this place" (Badar). [25]

A female participant highlighted her experience of immigration as one of the most significant events in her life:

"I have been living in Ireland from the last 3 years, I have to say ... coming to Ireland has been the biggest adventure I have ever did a mean [sic] coming from a city so noisy and full of sad events and crises to a small town in the west of Ireland so peaceful and quite [sic] and people here are friendly" (Ejaz). [26]

Despite the fact that this participant—a "newcomer" asylum seeker of Middle Eastern origin—is originally from a different country to the majority of the research participants, highlighting her experience of immigration emphasizes a commonality with others within the Muslim community. It affords an opportunity to affirm a sense of inclusion despite her difficult transition. [27]

The blog site can be viewed as a space which offers young people an opportunity to openly express aspects that matter to and about themselves. Young people consciously disclose those symbols and utterances which say "something" of who they are and their biographies. While this highly visual and discursive medium of communication can be viewed as an open-ended opportunity to reveal aspects of identity as youth may wish, the restrictions placed on the girls to post photographs however suggest that online activity can be highly circumscribed and guided by the norms of community. In this sense, it refracts the kinds of constraints encountered by girls in how they can perform their identities. [28]

4.2 Notable silences and "loud" statements

How particular messages or posts are responded to, or not, can also be revealing of people's comfort zones and how some are included or left excluded from a network. The majority of the contributors to the Growing up in the Ballyhaunis Muslim Community blog site were members of the "established" community, with their parents emigrating from Pakistan for employment. However, two "newcomer" sisters of Middle Eastern origin who had recently joined the Ballyhaunis Community as asylum-seekers chose to contribute posts to the blog site. These Muslim participants differed ethnically, linguistically and socio-

economically to the other participants. The nature of their posts to the blog site and the reactions of the other participants to their contributions are demonstrative of the manner in which differences within a community can be bypassed. [29]

Interestingly, these "newcomer" female participants engaged enthusiastically with the Growing up in the Ballyhaunis Community blog site, contributing seven posts to the main page of the blog site. They also placed four comments on posts contributed by the researcher and other participants. In contrast with other participants, posts by these participants seemed to emphasize family solidarity as a particularly important aspect of their lives. As they were not precluded from placing photographic posts on the blog site by their parents, they uploaded three photographs of their families. These photographs feature their younger siblings dressed up for a fancy dress party and reading a book. The theme of family also featured prominently in their text posts: "At home iam very differnt from school [sic].I make lots of joks [sic] with my sister i even make her angry" (Ejaz). The importance of family was also prevalent in their comments. A response to a short post by the researcher, encouraging participants to invite friends and family to view the blog site stated: "well i kinda dont know how to invite people but i showed it to my dad and he likes it" (Ejaz). This contrasts distinctly with the contributions of other participants where parental support and family life received no mention whatsoever. [30]

Despite making frequent contributions to the blog site during the two month period when the blog site was at its most active, and placing 4 comments on the work of other participants, these participants received little recognition from the other Pakistani origin participants. Only one comment was left on the six posts contributed by asylum seekers. The comment, "awwwwwwwwwwww thts sooooooo cute ..." (Parasa), was placed on a photographic post of the poster's younger brother wearing a Halloween costume. In contrast, each post by participants of Pakistani origin received two comments on average. The manner in which the online presence of the Middle Eastern asylum seeking participants was essentially ignored by all other participants can be interpreted in the context of their broader marginalization in the Muslim community at large. By failing to acknowledge these asylum seeking Middle Eastern community members, participants replicate the exclusion these young people already encounter in everyday community life. As we know, ignoring and "freezing out" participants whose contributions are not in line with the majority users has been shown to be a tactic employed by younger internet users in the interest of preserving the values and standards of the community (GRISSO & WEISS, 2005). It is mostly however illustrative of how they lack full community membership and do not feature in the broader narrative of the majority. Even online we can see the failure of their engagement with others as a window on the silent exclusions they are likely to feel elsewhere. [31]

Any significant differences between male and female members of the community also received little explicit recognition on the Growing up in the Ballyhaunis Muslim Community blog site. However, some of the older female participants drew attention to these differences through their contributions which read as "loud

statements" about their "offline" community life. The issue of unequal access to facilities for male and female members of the community was raised as part of a discussion on a new, local sporting facility: "well i think this is very fancy... but i would love to see some other things developed for girls as well ... its always has been bout boys ... its time they need to do something for girls" (Parasa). This comment received no response from male participants however. Another female participant expressed her agreement: "ah i think its an alright idea and i totally agree with Parasa […] its always about boys ... this latest edition is most likely going to be male dominatedn [sic] lol!!⁴" (Ujula) This girl went further to specify that separate facilities are needed for male and female community members: "they should seriuosly [sic] consider doing something for girls and ONLY for girls ... I think they should have like a centre where there are different activities goin on or a club but only for girls ..." (Ujula). Despite the fact that the male participants had been engaging in a lively debate on the topic of this sporting facility, with ten comments posted, these posts which draw attention to tensions within the community received no response. The lack of response to these comments from male participants suggests that they may be unwilling to broach discussions that reflect divisions and positions within the community. [32]

In contrast to these particular silences, young males were more prepared to make "loud" pejorative statements that reflect vociferous opposition to particular other youth that they view as invading their space. Three participants, in separate comments, voiced the concern that the facility would be of no benefit because there would be too much competition from other groups in the area. It was first stated by a participant that the facility would not be of any use to members of the community as they would have to share it with other ethnic minorities in the area: "It would stop the boredom but knackers play there most of the time so we dont go in much" (Badar). The racist expression "knacker" is used here to refer to members of the Traveling community and highlights the extent to which they are thought of as "other" by the young men and the extent to which they distance themselves.⁵ The centrality of an "us" and "them" dichotomy was further outlined in another post, discussing the need for an organized booking system: "i would like to see some form of booking system in place to stop any travelers or other irish people from annoying us while we're playing" (Maaz). [33]

The negotiation of one's inclusion in a community or social group necessitates drawing a boundary around the community. The exclusion of all who do not correspond to the ideals and common values of the community is a process which is also central to the symbolic construction of community (ELIAS & SCOTSON, 1965; STRATHERN, 1982). Exclusion of those who are different was shown to be an important process in the symbolic construction of community by participants. The use of "us" and "we" in these posts invoke community solidarity through opposition to other groups and communities in the area. The participants draw boundaries around the Muslim community (insiders) by referring to both

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4   "Lol" or "laugh out loud" is an expression widely used by teenagers on social networking sites when relaying humorous information to their peers.

5   The Traveling community is Ireland's only indigenous ethnic minority. They are ethnically and culturally distinct from the majority population and widely maintain traditions of nomadism.

members of the Traveling community and members of the majority society as "other" (outsiders). This demonstrates the centrality of identifying one's membership of the community in opposition to non-members. [34]

4.3 Expressing friendships online

This blog site is of course made up of friendship networks as well as acquaintances, and therefore offers a particularly interesting window on how young people talk to and about each other. While it may be no great surprise that the contributions of the vast majority of research participants conveys a strong sense of solidarity and friendship amongst themselves, there was however a marked difference in the manner in which female and male participants outwardly display friendship online. The discussion now focuses on how female participants explicitly demonstrate friendship and solidarities in more personalized ways through their posts, while male participants articulate their friendships in a more careful, more implicit manner. [35]

The norms and rules which govern the actions of male and female members of the Ballyhaunis Muslim Community differ greatly and this is evident in analyzing the nature of the blog posts. The majority of female participants did not place visual material on the blog site, while no such sanction was placed on male participants. As a result of this, the types of posts placed by male and female participants differed greatly. Of a total of 49 posts placed on the main page of the blog site, 28 and 21, respectively, were by female and male participants. Of the female posts, 2 combined visual and textual material, while the remaining 26 were text posts. In contrast, male participants placed only 4 text posts on the blog, with 17 posts consisting of photographic uploads and videos. However, the number of comments on posts placed by female and male participants was roughly equal at 34 and 36 respectively. [36]

Of the 26 text posts which were placed by female participants on the blog site, one quarter explicitly express the importance of friendship in their lives. Many Pakistani origin female participants dramatized their relationships with their fellow female "established" community members by addressing them directly and dramatically declaring their affection. One such female participant explicitly stated that her friendships are essential to her life: "I ave friends i cant live without […] Ballyhaunis wud be sooo dull without ye guys [sic]" (Parasa). In other female participants" posts the closeness of friendship ties was demonstrated through explicit declarations of affection: "Happy Birthday Ujuleeeee, LOVE YOU LOADS ..." (Bashira); "love ye all!" (Quadir); "Ujulee eats all my food, I love you Ujulee" (Bashira). [37]

By explicitly emphasizing the importance of their friendships in their daily lives and by openly declaring their affections for their female friends, female participants engage in explicit performances of their identities as "friends" (BOYD, 2006). Contributions such as these, which publicly declare their affections, use pseudonyms in a playful manner, and refer to intimate details of their friendships all demonstrate the manner in which female participants engage comfortably in

an online performance of this aspect of their identities. These performances showcase their position as friends, a role which expresses their social identity and situates them firmly as members of a community. [38]

The role of friendship in the lives of male participants was also demonstrated through their contributions to the blog site and almost 40% of their posts referred directly or indirectly to their friendships within the community. However, these references demonstrated the importance of their friendships in a less explicit manner than in the posts of female participants. Only one text post placed by male participants directly reflected on the role of friendship in the everyday lives of the participants: "Hanging out out [sic] wit mates is fun (most of the time!!!)" (Maaz). [39]

The casual manner in which this participant refers to his friendships contrasts starkly with the explicit declarations of friendly affection of the female participants. Rather than dramatically declaring the importance of friendship in his life, this participant simply refers to the fact that socializing with his friends is enjoyable. Even this statement is qualified "most of the time!!!!." The triple exclamation mark purposefully under-plays the role of friendship in his life. While this participant does not explicitly declare his affection for his friends, the degree of familiarity and solidarity between himself and his friends is still apparent from the teasing playful tone of this post (see PICHLER, 2006). [40]

Female participants were also much more likely than male participants to directly address friends in their text posts. 23 of the 26 text posts placed on the main page of the blog site by female participants began with a direct address or with a direct greeting: "hey Parasa!!! when r ya gonna [sic] put up another chapter" (Quadir). [41]

Even in cases where a post was directed to the group in general, female participants began with a familiarized greeting: "Hello everyone n welcome to my page" (Bashira); "yo people on earth do leave a comment bout my work ... tht wud be awsome ... cheers [sic]" (Parasa). Despite the fact that the posts placed on the main page of the blog site were publicly visible to all participants, the exchanges between the female participants are intimate and personalized. Through these personalized posts, the female participants use the blog site as a stage to affirm their friendships and solidarity as members of the same community. [42]

In contrast, in the 21 posts placed by male participants, only one participant used a direct address: "hi my name Hadi [sic]." (Hadi). The majority of the posts by male participants were directed towards all participants rather than any specific participants. A typical example is the following which as a riddle is posed to "someone" by a younger male participant in order to spark some reaction: "can someone answer the following Question?" "if a turtle doesn't have a shell, is he homeless or Naked????" (Habib). [43]

The video and photographic uploads from male participants contained no
addresses to participants and were simply given short titles and/or descriptions. A
video upload featuring a famous cricketer was simply captioned: "Shoaib Akhtar:
The fastest bowler of all time. Pakistan" (Habib). [44]

The contributions of the male participants, like those of the female participants,
were clearly intended to be seen by all participants. However the different styles
in addressing other users show a marked gendered process in how friendships
are made familiar. [45]

For male participants, the posting of visual materials represented an opportunity
to display the role of friendships in their lives and to socially locate themselves
also as community members. The main page of the blog site received 18 posts of
visual material from male participants, 16 of which featured friends and members
of participants' families. By featuring pictures of them interacting with friends and
family members, young people make a statement which helps locate for others
their social identities and the types of social groups of which they are a part
(LIVINGSTONE, 2008; BOYD, 2006; SIIBAK, 2010). The photographs of the
boys interacting with other boys of the community demonstrate solidarity and
belonging. This is exemplified by a photographic post by a younger male
participant socializing casually with nine of his friends outside the local Mosque
during the Muslim religious holiday of Eid. The level of familiarity between the
participant and his friends is demonstrated by the physical contact between the
participants, with their arms around one other and jumping onto their friends
backs "piggy back" style. The participants appear to be holding each other up as
they are all laughing uncontrollably. The comments placed on the post and the
laughter of the participants demonstrate how much fun they have in each other's
company and the enjoyment that they derive from their friendship: "klass [class]
day dat was [sic]" (Hadi); "Haider make sure u dont strangle poor Habib ... lol"
(Ghaffar). [46]

Other photographic and video posts highlight the level of familiarity between the
male participants. The contributors of the photographic and video footage in
many cases were featured only in an offstage capacity; instead of posting video
and photographic uploads in which they were visible they chose to showcase
friends or family members, also from the community, taking part in various
activities. One male contributor posted a series of videos of his friends which he
had filmed on his phone. These featured his friends playing pool, singing along to
music in a car and performing a dance during a talent show at school. Despite the
fact that the contributor was not present in these posts they stand as an
appropriation and showcase of his friendship with other members of the
community. [47]

The photographic posts placed by the male participants are perhaps not as
explicitly affirmative of friendship as the text posts placed by female participants.
However, they nonetheless evoke clearly the importance of friendship to the male
participants in presenting an overall collectively harmonious narrative. Unlike
observations we might make on their offline selves, the blog affords an

opportunity to consciously "do" friendship by presenting to each other images and symbols of friendship and statements that invoke cohesion and closure. While youth engage in friendship through the everyday activities and interactions they present, the online version is a more conscious performance of their social identity and their in-group status. [48]

A significant feature of the online interactions of both male and female participants is the use of nicknames and a certain amount of playful, as opposed to bullying, teasing (OCHS, 1992; PICHLER, 2006). Establishing oneself as a member of a community or of a social group is dependent on displaying a certain level of familiarity with the mutual members and with the customs and norms of the group (MORAN, 2007) and the use of nicknames and the practice of teasing can act as a powerful mechanism for reinforcing the boundaries and solidarities around the community among young people (PICHLER, 2006). By engaging in banter and teasing on the blog site, contributors display their familiarity with other participants and engage in performing identities as friends and as members of the community (see LIVINGSTONE, 2008). This performance of individual identity as embedded within social networks is an integral part of the symbolic construction of community. [49]

Female participants were more likely to use nicknames on the blog than male participants. While all participants were requested not to use real names and to invent pseudonyms, female participants appropriated and used their pseudonyms to a far greater extent than male participants, often identifying themselves by existing nicknames. One female participant demonstrated her close relationships with her best friends by listing out their nicknames. On each line of her auto-biographical text post she gives their established nicknames, followed by other names which she calls them:

> "Hala—golden girl/hatu/puddle/etc ... da list just goes on n on ... Bazi—
> Niamtay/bones...oops u no i adore ya ... Aaaaida—sexi wacko ... Ujuleeeeee ... lol ...
> i luv tht name ... n many more ... Omzzzzzz—my best friend" (Parasa).[6] [50]

Listing out all of her friends' nicknames allows this participant to demonstrate the high degree of familiarity which unites them. Through this she recreates the collective identity of the friendship group to which she has a strong feeling of belonging. Nicknames are also used to tease other female participants about their appearance—"bones"—and personalities—"Golden girl," "sexi wacko." However by including the statements "oops no I adore you" and "lol" she is careful to clarify that offense is never intended. Rather than constituting a form of bullying, the use of these nicknames displays familiarity and invokes closeness within their friendship (see PICHLER, 2006). [51]

Teasing was also prevalent in the posts of male participants but used somewhat differently. While male participants did not use nicknames, they nonetheless

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6   In cases where nicknames used by participants within blog posts were potentially identifiable, they have been substituted with the appropriate pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of research participants.

demonstrated their familiarity and the bonds of friendship by teasing each other about their sport club attachments; somewhat more. One male participant, who does not play hurling[7], used the blog site to tease his friends who had lost a hurling match to a team from a neighboring parish: "BALLYHAUNIS LOST TO TOREEN ... AGAIN" (Badar); "go away, will ya" (Haider). [52]

In contrast to the female participants he does not appear to be worried about causing excessive offense and can depend that his remarks will be taken humorously. The dismissive response "go away, will ya" is playfully abrasive and indicates the high level of familiarity between them which allows the respondent to dismiss the teasing. A similar interaction occurred in a reference to football. One male participant, in an auto-biographical text post stated: "i like any sport that doesn't involve me "rugby" tackling anyone" (Maaz). This comment led to the exchange of some banter and teasing: "U RUGBY TACKEL US EVEN IN FOOTBALL … WAT R U ON ABOUT [sic]" (Badar); "hmm ... good point but ah well" (Maaz). It is evident from the good humored response of Maaz that the other participant's comment is not a source of offence and is rather taken in good spirit. [53]

Both males and females engage in banter and teasing to demonstrate the closeness of their relationships with their friends and their membership of the community. However, the contrast between the way that this takes place in male and female posts on the blog site is evocative of the significant gendered differences in how social membership is negotiated and appropriated in day to day situations. [54]

5. Conclusion

To conclude, what can a blog site add to our understanding about young Muslims' everyday lives? When undertaken from a youth participatory approach, blogging can be quite revealing in understanding young people's relationships amongst each other and with the wider social contexts in which they live. This research specifically set out to allow young Muslims to discuss, in an open-ended way, any aspects of their lives and in this sense, is a youth-centered approach. In their online performances, we encountered that the majority of young Muslim girls were restricted in what they could visually present in the process of "self-ing" through online activity. How to present the "me" in a visual sense is somewhat less free compared with their male counterparts. While this was less the case for Middle Eastern asylum seeking Muslim girls who occupy a different social position and biography within the community, girls generally relied more heavily in performing and capturing their relationships through written expression. Despite this restriction, girls from the "established" Pakistani group appear very comfortable and forthcoming to talk and express their friendships in more personalized and emotive ways. The boys reveal their closeness to one another by using various images and language that act as props and which distance themselves from having to express anything too emotive about friendships. While

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7   A traditional Irish field game involving two teams of 15 players who attempt to score goals and points using a small leather ball (*sliothar*) and long wooden sticks (*hurls*).

restricted in the visual domain, it appears then that Muslim girls are freer in their expressiveness online compared with boys. The manner in which bonds are performed and appropriated by male and female participants are different but the online activity enabled an outward show of solidarity and cohesion among young people which they may not get a chance to affirm in other ways. [55]

The position of the "newcomer" asylum seeking youth vis-à-vis others seems less inclusive however. The blog site provided a forum through which they presented themselves and their lives to others in a way that seemed enjoyable—if we can assume this from the intensity of their activity. Their engagement in "self-ing" on the blog site however met with notable silence on the part of other members of the "established" Pakistani group—and reveals the extent to which they are outsiders in the wider community narrative of Muslim life in the town. While the blog site potentially enabled these girls to move into the worlds of the more established Muslim community, little reciprocity was forthcoming to encourage further interaction. An additional or alternative blog site devoted entirely to asylum seekers was beyond what this study aimed to carry out and, in our view, providing a separate blog site would have overly highlighted differences among the youth in such a small environment. Nevertheless, in a larger population context, a blog site for asylum seeker youth might well prove a worthwhile and perhaps a more open and inclusive forum for expression. In the story presented here it appears that the potential for more engaged communication with the wider Muslim group is limited. The blog interactions may indeed reveal somewhat an alternative lens on their offline selves. [56]

The blog site also channeled among the community of users what might be described as "loud statements" or strong opinions about particular problems. While some of the girls took the opportunity to criticize the lack of opportunity for girls in their physical environment, the boys expressed their disdain for those who invade their spaces in the community. They ignore the statements of the girls and thereby dissipate any potential tension were they to respond. In their online interactions, a certain degree of control and crafting can be exercised in order to maintain a generally harmonious atmosphere among the user community. [57]

In conclusion, we believe there are advantages to establishing a blog site for youth to express themselves in ways that have not been overly preset by the researcher through traditional methods such as interviewing. Youth themselves present what they wish to present and how to engage in "self-ing" online—albeit their wider position and relationships in society, as Muslim girls or Muslim boys— shape the way they can go about doing it. The blog site approach offers an alternative window on the nature of their relationships and positionality within their communities. We would advocate its incorporation as a form of triangulation with other methods of inquiry. There are of course limitations to all methods and we must be attuned to the presence and influence of the virtual "generalized other" in terms of the caution people can exercise when communicating with more familiar others. [58]

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