Keepin' it real: Styling authenticity on Twitter disinformation accounts
Handles and usernames: How metadata contributes to identity performance

Research Question:
How do disinformation accounts style their profile meta-data to authenticate performances of identity?

1. Background
- **Aim:** The aim of my thesis is to investigate how authentication processes were carried out amongst a set of popular disinformation accounts. The disinformation accounts in my sample were reported in mainstream news media as being evidence of public opinion, demonstrating at some level they were believed to be real. I therefore aim to investigate how this perception of 'realness' was achieved via linguistic strategies.
- **What is disinformation?** The practice of sharing inaccurate information to manipulate public opinion of certain topics (Elyashar et al 2017).
- **What is authenticity?** I approach and view authenticity as a dynamic process that can be performed and negotiated, as opposed to a static quality that either is or is not present. Rather than trying to analyse if a performance is authentic or not, I aim to investigate how authentication processes may be contributed to by the linguistic features present in the accounts, by focussing on their metadata (in this chapter).

2. What is metadata?
Metadata has previously been defined as 'characteristics of a Twitter profile that (are independent of tweet content)' (Morgan-Lopez et al 2017:3). This means anything that is not a tweet could be counted as metadata. I focus on handles and usernames in this chapter because they are controlled by humans rather than being generated automatically by the platform. The features focussed upon in this chapter are circled below.

3. Data sample
5 accounts are focused on throughout the thesis:
1. @ten_GOP 2. @pamela_moore13 3. @LuisaHaynes 4. @SouthLoneStar 5. @USA_GunSlinger

This chapter aims to contextualise findings from the aforementioned 5 accounts by situating the findings amongst a wider sample.

This will make it possible to contextualise findings about the accounts in question, with reference to wider practices in the creation of profile metadata in disinformation accounts.

Figure 1: Layout of a Twitter profile

4. The Analysis:
Previous research suggests that naming strategies can influence how an account is perceived. According to Jäkälä and Berki (2013), accounts with eponymous names (first names) are viewed as more authentic and credible than pseudonymous ones (based on other information e.g. location/hobby), due to them providing a link with the physical world.

I categorised all handles and usernames as being either eponymous or pseudonymous, and then further labelled them for what identity aspects their names presented. If more than one aspect was present, numerous labels were applied.
For example:
Handle: @rightnpr
Username: Right and Proud
Naming strategy: pseudonymous
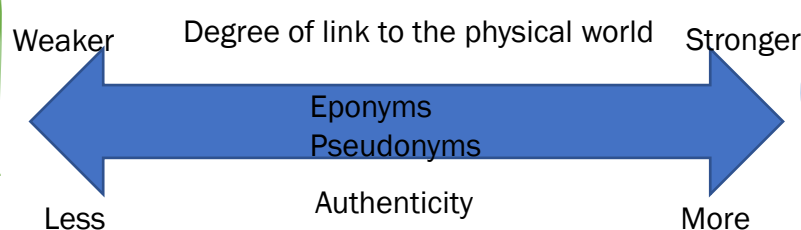Identity aspect: political affiliation

8. Questions for the future

1. My next area of analysis will be profile pictures. I would appreciate getting feedback from anyone regarding useful models or approaches to analysing images, particularly in relation to identity performance
2. I was supposed to attend a corpus summer school this year, but due to COVID-19 it is no longer going ahead. I was hoping to find out if/how corpus methods might be useful for my future research questions. If anyone has any useful corpus resources/experiences to share, it would be really appreciated.

5. The Results:
The five accounts focussed on throughout the thesis were labelled and then compared against a wider sample of other 'popular accounts' (accounts with more than 10,000 followers) and 'less popular accounts' (accounts with 5,000-9,999 followers). The handles never changed during the accounts' activation, but the usernames did. All names used by the accounts are included in table 2 below.

Handle	Name	Location	Political affiliation	Personality trait	Hobbies/Interests	Gender
@Ten_GOP		✓	✓			
@wokeluisa	✓			✓		✓
@pamela_moore13	✓					✓
@SouthLoneStar		✓				
@USA_GunSlinger		✓			✓	

Table 1: Identity aspects signalled in 5 account handles

Username	Name	Location	Political affiliation	Personality trait	Hobbies/Interests	Gender
Tennessee GOP		✓				
Tennessee		✓				
Luisa Haynes	✓					✓
Pamela Moore	✓					✓
South Lone Star		✓				
Texas Lone Star		✓				
American GunSlinger		✓			✓	
GunSlinger Girl					✓	✓

Table 2: Identity aspects signalled in 5 account usernames

6. Pseudonyms, eponyms and identity aspects
The tables above demonstrate that amongst the 5 accounts, 2 of the accounts used eponyms in both their usernames and handles (Pamela Moore and Luisa Haynes), while pseudonymous links to location were also prevalent. A look at the results of the wider sample demonstrates a reduction in representation of eponyms and gender.

Naming strategy	Handle (n)	Handle (%)	Username (n)	Username (%)
Eponyms	10	17%	11	19%
Pseudonyms	48	83%	47	81%
Total	58	100%	58	100%

Table 3: Naming strategies used in other popular accounts

Identity aspect	Handles. Number of instances (n:101)	Handles. Proportion of sample representing each identity aspect (%)	Usernames. Number of instances (n:101)	Usernames. Proportion of sample representing each identity aspect (%)
Geographical location	31	53%	29	50%
News feed	30	52%	30	52%
Name	10	17%	12	21%
Gender	9	16%	9	16%
Hobbies/interests	10	17%	9	16%
Personality trait	3	5%	3	5%
Political affiliation	3	5%	2	3%
Ethnicity	3	5%	2	3%
Animals	2	3%	2	3%
Organisation	0	0%	0	0%

Table 4: Naming strategies used in other popular accounts

7. Conclusion
The results show that pseudonyms relating to location are popular forms of identity features used in naming presentations of disinformation accounts.
This differs from what we may expect to see based on findings from 'ordinary' accounts: eponyms are found to be most credible and authentic because they 'demonstrate a link to the physical world' (Jäkälä and Berki 2013). I argue that locations also provide a link to the physical world, and it is the strength of this link that contributes to authenticating processes, rather than one type of naming strategy (e.g. eponym versus pseudonym) being statically more authentic than another. The model I suggest can be visualised as displayed to the right.

Weaker ← Degree of link to the physical world → Stronger
Eponyms / Pseudonyms
Less ← Authenticity → More

Figure 2: Continuum of naming strategies in relation to authenticity