

**Performance, Structure and Ideal Identity: reconceptualising teachers'  
engagement in online social spaces.**

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**Abstract**

In recent years teachers have turned to online social spaces for peer-to-peer interaction in increasing numbers. This online engagement has been highlighted by both practitioners and academics as having important implications for teachers' professional learning and development. However, there is a need to

move beyond instrumental discourses that simply discuss engagement and technology in terms of costs and benefits, and analyse the complex social contexts in which engagement takes place. Therefore, presenting data from a digital ethnography of three online social spaces used by teachers, this paper uses professional identity as an analytical framework in order to understand teachers' online engagement in holistic terms in a way that acknowledges the messy social realities in which teachers work. It then presents a new theoretical framework for conceptualising teachers' professional identity that develops the concept of embedded ideal identity and takes into account context, social complexity, structure and agency.

## **Introduction**

Online social spaces are becoming increasingly popular among teachers as an easy means of engaging with peers and wider professional communities (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Trust, Kurtka & Carpenter, 2016). Such engagement is increasingly highlighted by both practitioners (e.g. Booth, 2015; McKain, 2015) and academics (e.g. deNoyelles & Raider-Roth, 2015; Tour, 2016; Trust et al., 2016) as an important part of teachers' professional development and learning. However, much of this emergent body of literature tends to focus on engagement in instrumental terms without discussing the messy social realities of online interaction in sufficient depth. Therefore, taking professional identity as an analytical framework, this paper offers a naturalistic ethnographic study of teachers' online engagement that aims to investigate the phenomenon in holistic terms. It aims to move beyond instrumentalist discourses and attempts to understand the social complexities and messy realities of the social worlds in which teachers interact. This necessitates a reconceptualization of professional identity for the digital age. A new model for understanding professional identity within online social contexts is therefore presented that distinguishes between the construction and performance of professional identity and develops the concept of embedded ideals.

## **Background**

Discourses from both policy makers and practitioners emphasising the potential benefits of online peer-to-peer interaction for teachers' professional development have appeared since the mid-1990's (BECTa, 1999: 5; Selwyn, 2000). Teachers' actual engagement in online social spaces failed to live up to the

positive discourses in the late 1990s (Selwyn, 2000). However, the huge growth in online social media and online social networking over the last 10 years has seen a great expansion in the number of online social spaces available to teachers and an exponential growth in the number of teachers using them (Duncan-Howell, 2010).

This is reflected in the significant investment by educational publishers and resource providers in the social aspects of their websites (Robson, 2016) and in the discourses emerging from the teaching profession emphasising the benefits of professional online networking (Bloom, 2015; McKain, 2015). However, thus far, much of the academic literature discussing teachers' online peer-to-peer interaction has tended to focus either on the 'potential' of online social spaces for professional development (Carr & Chambers, 2006; Karagiorgi & Lymbouridou, 2009; Selwyn, 2000) or teachers' engagement in *closed* spaces linked with formal training programmes (Comas-Quinn, 2011; Delahunty, 2012; Georgiou et al., 2012; Irwin & Hramiak, 2010). This no doubt reflects the limited number of teachers engaging in online social spaces prior to the explosion of online social media (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Selwyn, 2000).

However, since expansion in the number of teachers engaging in freely available, open and informal (not tied to any formal educational or CPD programme) online social spaces, researchers have now focused on teachers' actual experiences (Robson, 2016). This growing body of literature offers case studies and detailed analyses of professional learning and development that can take place through teachers' online peer-to-peer engagement. As such,

increasing work is being undertaken analysing the ways in which teachers' online engagement supports this through: sharing lesson plans and teaching strategies (Flanigan, 2011); emotional support and aggregating professional knowledge (Hur & Brush, 2009); sharing and creating professional knowledge (Duncan-Howell, 2010); collaborating and interacting (Tour, 2016); reflecting on practice (deNoyelles & Raider-Roth, 2015); gaining community based support (Tsiotakis & Jimoyiannis, 2016; Visser, Evering & Barrett, 2014); engaging in a community of practice (Kelly & Antonio, 2016); and generating online professional learning networks (Trust et al., 2016).

Many of these studies tend to discuss teachers' engagement in online social spaces in terms of the benefits (and costs) to professional learning and development, or focus on issues relating to the technical design and management of online communities. Few have problematized the online contexts in which teachers engage in social terms. Rather, online social spaces are largely viewed in neutral instrumental terms, as technological facilitators of interaction. However, an important body of work within educational technology (e.g. Bayne, 2015; Hamilton & Friesen, 2013; Robson, 2016; Selwyn, 2011), alongside work in Internet Studies, Philosophy of Technology, Anthropology, and Software Studies (e.g., Baker, 2012; Coleman, 2014), highlights the complex relationship between social context and technology (Latour, 1993). This research emphasises the complex, messy, social realities of online social spaces and online engagement. Assumptions about the neutrality and the instrumental or essentialist nature of technology are critiqued (Hamilton & Friesen, 2013) and

the complex relationship between structure and agency analysed (Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2012).

This paper, therefore, attempts to apply some of this thinking to teachers' online engagement. It presents data from a digital ethnography of Religious Education teachers' engagement in online social spaces and attempts to offer a case study of complexity that highlights the messy realities of teachers' engagement in online social spaces. The paper builds on Robson (2016), which used data from the same ethnography to analyse the structured nature of the online social spaces in which participants engaged. This previous paper analysed the ways in which the commercial agendas of the parent organisations (that provided the spaces), dominant discourses, and the limitations of the technical design and functionality provided a structured context that shaped users' online engagement. This paper builds on this structured understanding of online space but brings teachers back into more detailed focus by providing a richer analysis of teachers' online engagement through the lens of professional identity. The concept of teachers' professional identity (understood in social, postmodern and discursive terms) is used as a holistic framework for understanding the relationship between online contexts and teachers' professional lives. This paper, therefore, aims to move beyond instrumentalist discourses, gain a deeper understanding of the social complexities associated with teachers' online engagement, and develop a new way of conceptualising professional identity and professional development within an increasingly digital context.

## **Methodology**

The data used for this paper come from a digital ethnography (Boellstorff, 2012) of teachers' engagement in online social spaces that investigated the research question of how teachers' professional identities can be constructed and performed through their engagement in online social spaces. A full account of the methodology can be found in Robson (2016) and Robson (in press). In order to study teachers' actual engagement in online social spaces a naturalistic inductive methodological approach was deemed most appropriate (Coleman 2010). Within this broad approach, digital ethnography was chosen as a means of examining teachers' engagement in these spaces in a way that valued their own perspectives and meanings, while enabling me to place that everyday detail within the context of wider social and professional structures and academic theory (Walford, 2008: 7).

I, therefore, spent a year in the field studying three online social spaces: a Forum provided by an educational publisher, a Facebook Page managed by a subject association, and a Facebook Group started by a teacher. These online social spaces were subject specific and were used by teachers of Religious Education (RE). RE was selected since many RE teachers are sole subject specialists in their schools, often reporting feelings of isolation and a lack of networking opportunities (NATRE, 2012). Engagement in online social spaces has consequently been highlighted as the only opportunity for peer-to-peer subject specialist networking available to many RE teachers (REC, 2013). As such, the subject represents an extreme case study that has the potential to cast light on the wider phenomenon of teachers' engagement in online social spaces.

The three spaces were selected as having the largest number of RE teachers actively engaging within them at the time of the fieldwork (2013). The forum had 363 active<sup>1</sup> users. It was a text-based phpBB forum, structured by threads and posts, that had been modified to include embedded adverts related to the publisher's and its partners' interests and to allow users to upload resources linked with their accounts. Registration was required to post on the forum, download resources and use the search function, but the majority of users registered with pseudonyms. The Facebook Page had 334 active users and had been established by a subject organization. During the fieldwork period the original Facebook page design was used which prioritised starter posts made by the page owner. Starter posts made by other users appeared in a separate expandable box on the right hand side of the screen and were largely invisible. This meant that the majority of the interaction took place in relation to the page owner's posts and agendas. The Facebook Group, started by an RE teacher, had 563 active users. The design of the Facebook group followed that of a traditional text-based forum, with threads ordered by the date and time of the most recent activity. Users in all three spaces were RE subject specialists almost entirely at secondary school level, were at a variety of stages in their careers, and were from a variety of different UK school types (community schools, academies, faith schools, and private schools).

The primary method of data collection was participant observation. This afforded the opportunity to observe users of each space in a naturalistic manner,

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<sup>1</sup> Having made at least one post during the fieldwork period.



while, as a participant, giving me insight into how individuals understood and engaged in the spaces from a user perspective. I adopted the role of peripheral member researcher (DeWalt & Dewalt, 2002), asking questions where appropriate and contributing to online discussions in non-controversial and non-confrontational ways where my existing knowledge and experience allowed. I spent 12 months in each online social space concurrently, documenting my observations through fieldnotes.

Digital contexts allow for the unbiased collection of all interactions between participants. However, a year's worth of data from each online social space was too much to undertake in depth qualitative analysis. Therefore, I supplemented focused observations with three 8-week long samples of all recordable interaction (all threads, posts, and likes were scraped from the online social spaces during these periods of time). Three samples were taken in order to provide a reflection of the changing nature of topics and types of interaction over the academic year (including periods of term time and holidays). The duration of 8-weeks was deemed appropriate to capture a range of complete conversations on a variety of topics, while allowing events in the news to develop and be discussed.

These samples and fieldnotes were triangulated with in depth online and offline narrative-based interviews (8 participants from the forum, 7 from the Facebook Page, and 5 from the Facebook Group). Narrative interviews enabled me to situate users' online engagement within their wider professional narratives allowing for a more holistic exploration of teachers' engagement from

own perspectives than other interview techniques afforded. Interviews began online and were focused on building a narrative related to the participants' engagement in online social spaces in a collaborative process between participant and researcher. Googledocs was used as a way of enhancing the collaboration. Online interactions were copied and pasted into the document so participants could discuss particular posts they had made and wider issues around engagement. Online interviews typically lasted one month and produced rich documents (an average of 34 pages long). A semi-structured offline interview was then undertaken with each participant, using the collaborative document as a conversation starter. Where online interviews allowed participants time and space to formulate and craft their answers, the offline interviews encouraged more spontaneous and open responses (James & Busher, 2009), providing two sets of complementary data.

Finally, analysis of grey literature provided important background information to the political and policy context and wider educational professional discourses. This included relevant media articles (e.g. BBC, 2011; Holness, 2012), blog posts (e.g. The Talking Donkey, 2013), reports (e.g. Keast, 2011), press releases (e.g. REC, 2011), and Hansard online (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/search?searchTerm=religious%20education>). All data were brought together and analysed holistically using a grounded approach with codes and themes emerging from the data through a cyclical and iterative process of reduction, synthesis and conclusion drawing based on Miles and Huberman's (1994) analytical framework.

### *Limitations*

Every effort was made to ensure the research process was rigorous and Tracy's (2010) eight criteria for 'excellent qualitative research' were used to shape the design and analysis. The research is limited by the fact that I was the only researcher and greater reliability and credibility could have been achieved if another researcher had been involved in both data collection and analysis. This was not possible due to a lack of capacity and budget. Two attempts were made to diminish the impact of this limitation: firstly, observational data was triangulated with sampled interactions and interview data; secondly emerging themes were discussed with participants. However, given the design limitations, the small scale of this research project, and the specific focus on RE teachers, it is important to acknowledge the emergent nature of the theoretical perspectives discussed in this paper.

### **Findings**

From very early on in the study it became clear that there were two main ways in which teachers engaged in the spaces: active and more passive forms of engagement. Active engagement involved users entering the online social spaces in a way that was publically visible to others – representing themselves in the space through posts, online social interactions and through the use of space-specific functionality ('liking' on Facebook), all of which left observable artifacts. More passive forms of engagement involved users reading, thinking about, and internalising materials and information posted by other people. Although distinct activities, they were generally linked with reading others' posts usually

preceding active engagement. However, though closely related, both forms of engagement provided opportunities for different kinds of identity work.

### *Identity work through active engagement*

It was possible to observe teachers engaging in identity work in a number of different ways in relation to their active online engagement. Taking a discursive view, identity was most commonly expressed through teachers' peer-to-peer online discussions. Although this kind of performative expression of identity was apparent in a range of different kinds of posts, it was most observable in more in-depth debates where users tended to make longer and more detailed posts.

Debates ranged across a wide variety of topics, from educational policy to exam boards selection. It was possible to observe teachers in these debates adopting identity positions within the discourse and expressing them through public posts as a form of identity performance. For example, in a forum thread, *Can RE Survive*, teachers discussed the impact on RE of the UK Government's education reforms, focusing particularly on academisation, the English Baccalaureate, and the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove.

Within this debate, and the huge number of similar, it was possible to observe the adoption of highly politicised language relating to the view that RE as a subject was 'under attack' by the Government. Combative language dominated many of the posts. For example, Candice voiced the frustration many teachers felt by asking the angry question: 'when will the government stop this

attack RE?’ Other users responded to this expression of frustrated, political anger, reproducing key identity positions in discussing the ‘Govian attacks’ and ‘the government’s conspiracy to destroy RE’. By adopting such language users could instantly enter the online discourse in an established way and perform identity positions rooted in established, community-wide negative understandings of policy change.

Many users highlighted the importance of having a ‘safe space’ online to be angry in and to vent frustration. Tom, for example, suggested that being a ‘disgruntled teacher’ is a ‘stereotype’ at the moment. As such he deliberately avoided complaining or discussing policy with his school-based colleagues so as ‘not to get a reputation for being grumpy’. However, he valued the opportunity to express his political views, anger and frustration and perform this core part of his professional identity in a space populated by like-minded peers – ‘I think I’d explode without it!’.

These politically oriented expressions particularly involved pugnacious language discussing ‘the fight’ and ‘the battle to save RE’. For example:

What can we do to stop this stupid man’s [Michael Gove] attack on our subject... we’ll keep fighting and we’ll win! He’s got to get shuffled soon and when he does, I for one will still be here working to save our subject!

This bombastic post illustrates a number of key phrases and themes (‘attack’, ‘fight’, ‘win’, personal attacks on Gove, saving the subject) that occurred across all three online social spaces. Each phrase is conceptually significant and would have been responded to in specific ways by the wider community, displaying a

shared understanding. For example, the assumed need to fight belies discursive meaning-making whereby a shared understanding of policy change indicated a targeted attack on RE that would lead to its ultimate demise in UK schools. The 'fight', would be understood as referring to a variety of group-wide activities – sending letters to MPs, lobbying through member organisations etc. By adopting such language, users were able to express quickly key ideas, familiar to the whole community, about the impact of policy on RE and perform key identity positions rooted in shared understandings of RE professionals as agentic political activists, fighting against policy change to 'save' their subject.

These political identity performances illustrate the complex range of professional activities that took place online. However, it is important not to reduce teachers' online interaction and identity work just to political discourse. Similar identity performance was apparent across the whole range of topics that were discussed online.

For example, as might be predicted, a large part of teachers' online interactions were related to requesting and giving practical teaching advice, lesson ideas, and resources. Here it was also possible to observe professional identity performance. Through their replies, users were able to express and publically asserted a range of identity positions –being an expert in pedagogy, in Buddhist studies, being a mentor, technology guru, resource creator etc. As Judi stated: 'I really enjoy giving advice about using technology because that's me. That's what I do.'

Some users took a calculated approach to this kind of performative identity work. Active online engagement provided an important opportunity to present themselves in idealised forms. For example, Benjamin stated:

I don't talk about my bad lessons, my period one on a Friday, that doesn't get discussed; but my Ofsted inspection ones that have been graded outstanding are there. You're able to paint a picture with what you post...

Benjamin clearly describes agentially managing the way he is perceived by his online peers through the careful presentation of content and resources. This presentation of idealised identity required acceptance by the wider community. Some users reported occasionally being suspicious of the claims of others. However, the majority appeared comfortable with the idea that individuals would be presenting idealised forms of self and were willing to suspend their disbelief as part of a collaborative performance.

Given the professional nature of the spaces, the main reason given for this kind of identity management was 'jobs'. Many teachers, even if they were not actively job-seeking, viewed peers' perception of them as having potential implications (positive or negative) for future employment. As Helen stated: 'I always try to be careful about what I say and how I might be seen. You never know when you might need a new job!' This concern was borne out by one interviewee who confidentially described shortlisting someone for a job interview based on resources the candidate had posted online, despite their lack of experience.

However, some interviewees described agentic performance management in less instrumental terms, viewing simply being held in high esteem by colleagues as being intrinsically valuable. Online engagement allowed these teachers 'to be the teacher that you would really like to be' (Benjamin). Different aspects of professional identity were important to different teachers. Abney for example described his interest in politics and educational policy, describing how he expressed this interest by consistently joining in political debates and cultivating his identity as 'the politics guy' within the community:

If I see a news story about RE, I try and make sure I'm the first person to post the link. But... I always try and add some commentary... I'm quite an expert now. I even look things up in Hansard!

Online engagement not only provided Abney with the opportunity to perform the 'political expert' aspect of his professional identity, but afforded him the opportunity to manage his peers' perceptions of him.

From a more practical perspective, Lorraine described feeling empowered by advising colleagues. She deliberately emphasised her experience in her online interactions in order to develop her role as a mentor within the online community –a core part of her professional identity:

I've been teaching for years... I've got a huge amount of experience... but it's not really valued at my school. I like giving advice on here, but ... I always mention I'm a Head of Department and big up my experience. People listen to you properly then.



Thus, active engagement in online social spaces provided users with a variety of ways to undertake identity work. These were usually discursive identity performances. Although located in and dependant upon acceptance by their peers, teachers' identity performances were often rooted in a strong sense of agency, with users carefully managing their performances and the impressions of their peers and presenting idealised versions of themselves.

### *Identity work through more passive forms of engagement*

Although a key part of the majority of users' engagement in the online social spaces, more passive forms of engagement (reading and internalising online materials) necessarily left fewer observable artefacts than active engagement. However, it was possible to observe users reproducing discourses and key concepts in a way that showed internalisation of existing materials. As described above, many users attempted to manage the impressions of their peers by presenting themselves in idealised forms. However, this could only have meaning in the community if there were shared understandings of what it means to be 'a good teacher' and the presented ideals were accepted. These shared understandings can be seen as forming a core part of the social structures of the online spaces. Contained within existing materials were performative expressions of identity which held embedded ideals. By internalising these ideals teachers' understandings of themselves and what it means to be a teacher were shaped.

Charlotte describes this: 'I came on here to ask for advice, but then I saw how helpful people... are. I realised, as professionals, we should all be like that,

so I now really try to offer help... where I can.' Charlotte describes entering the site, engaging with existing material, gaining fresh insight into being a professional, and then aspiring to that identity. Ideal identity, embedded in the social structure of the space, had a constructive influence on Charlotte's own professional identity. Helen similarly describes the influence of embedded ideals:

I read all about the stuff... with the EBacc and free schools and I realised I needed to get more involved in politics. So I started writing to my MP and generally getting more involved... we've all got to be political now.

Just like Charlotte, Helen engaged with shared understandings of the political situation and embedded ideals that emphasised professional identity in political terms. Through these shared understandings and assumptions she aspired to this ideal.

Thus, through more passive forms of engagement, teachers internalised existing material containing discursive identity performances of other users, acting as vehicles for embedded ideals. This had a constructive influence on their understandings of themselves as professionals. Users engaged with these embedded ideals, aspired to them, and, through active performative engagement, reproduced them. Therefore, active and more passive forms of engagement in the online social spaces were closely related. Active engagement can be viewed in agentic, performative terms, while more passive engagement can be viewed in structured, constructive terms, linked with embedded ideals.

## **Discussion**

In presenting these ethnographic findings through the lens of professional identity, I have attempted to illustrate the complexities of teachers' online engagement and the messy social realities of online social spaces. The kinds of identity work teachers engaged in can be conceptualised in *both* performative *and* constructive terms. As opposed to much of the literature on teachers' professional identity (see Beijaard *et al.*, 2004), where the terms are often used interchangeably, within the online contexts, performance and construction of identity were conceptually distinct linked respectively with more active and more passive forms of engagement.

Drawing on Goffman's (1959) ideas of performativity, it was possible to see the online social spaces acting as front regions in which identity could be agentically performed enabling users to manage the impressions of their peers and present themselves in idealised forms. However, alongside this agentic self-presentation, it was also possible to observe embedded shared understandings of ideal identity forming a social structure (King, 2005) that, through more passive forms of engagement, had a constructive influence on users' self-conceptualisations. These embedded ideals were then reproduced through performance ensuring the ongoing constructive power of the online social structure (Nash, 1990).

This structured, passive shaping of users' professional identity can be seen as a form of professional normalisation, with online engagement having disciplinary, constructive power over users' identity (Foucault, 1975). Shared understandings of professionalism and embedded ideal identity positions were

internalised, aspired to, performed and discursively reproduced (Benwell & Stockoe, 2006). However, these performances reflected agentic individualised interpretations and deliberate impression management. As such the online social spaces can be viewed as complex social contexts where structure and agency are held together in uncomfortable tension.

This study therefore, offers a conceptual model of professional identity, rooted in the digital age, that views performance and construction of identity as separate constructs, that hold together both agentic and structured ways of interacting in complex social spaces. These constructs are tied together by the concept of ideal identity. Embedded ideals are both structural, shaping users' professional identities, and agentic identity expressions that, as suggested by Butler (1990), have the potential to develop through repeated performance. Ideal identity, then, is both the mechanism of normalisation and the process through which agency is enacted.

This is conceptually significant. By understanding teachers' online peer-to-peer engagement through a framework of embedded ideals, the social complexity of the online context is appropriately emphasised, and a heuristic device is provided for understanding the importance of both structure and agency in teachers' interactions.

## **Conclusion**

As teachers increasingly turn towards online social spaces for peer-to-peer interaction (Duncan-Howell, 2010), there is a need to move beyond

instrumental discourses relating to teacher development and problematize the spaces themselves in a way that reflects the messy social realities teachers engage in (Cho, Ro & Littenberg-tobias, 2013; Robson, 2016). This paper therefore attempts to develop a conceptual framework outlined in Robson (2016) that highlights the structured social complexity of online social space. By conducting an in depth analysis of teachers' online engagement through the lens of professional identity, the paper has sought to refocus the findings related to structure and social complexity in a way that places teachers and teacher development at its centre. This has highlighted the need to reconceptualize not only teachers' online engagement, but also the wider concept of professional identity to take into account the digital context. The proposed reconceptualization suggests a need to separate out ideas of performance and construction of identity, holding them together in parallel tension with structure and agency through the concept of embedded ideal identity.

Embedded ideal identity is both the mechanism of construction (structure), normalising behaviour and shaping professional identity (Foucault, 1975), and the manifestation of performance (agency). Through agentic performances and reinterpretations (Butler, 1990) of ideals teachers can shape the structured contexts in which they engage.

This has implications for teachers' CPD. Language of ideal identity, performance and construction offers a heuristic device for self-reflection on online engagement. Such reflection can empower teachers to take more agentic approaches to their professional development. Firstly, reflection through the

lens of performance can help teachers develop a richer sense of themselves as professionals and the ideal professionals they want to be, while challenging assumptions about embedded ideals. Secondly, the lens of performance can empower teachers to engage in digital contexts in a strategic manner, managing peer perceptions and maximising the potential for future employment. Thirdly, the lens of identity construction can help teachers become aware of the influence others may have on their ideas, language and behaviour, and the need for critical engagement with all online material. Finally, the lens of identity construction can highlight strategic opportunities for teachers to contribute to other teachers' CPD.

Similarly, by understanding the social complexities around online engagement, CPD providers can move beyond instrumental discourses and consider the range of CPD opportunities available to teachers through online social spaces in more critical and nuanced terms. Considering CPD through the lens of identity performance, construction and embedded ideals could be an important part of the next phase of research and development for CPD providers interested in integrating online engagement into their work. Such a framework presents CPD providers with two key challenges: firstly, to develop formal pedagogic approaches and informal guidance that will enhance opportunities for agentic online professional development; secondly, to design the next generation of online social spaces in a way that enhances the agentic affordances of digital contexts. These two challenges could form the basis of future work in relation to teachers' professional development, but such work should emphasise the inherent social complexities of online social space.

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### **Statement on open data, ethics and conflicts of interest**

The qualitative data used in this paper can be made available in a fully anonymised form on request. The research was approved by Oxford University's Central University Research Ethics Committee and research was carried out in accordance with both BERA's ethical guidelines and guidelines produced by the Association of Internet Researchers. A fuller discussion of measures taken to conduct this study with ethical rigour can be seen in Robson (in press). There are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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