

Pacific identity discourses on Twitter: Constructing cyberspaces of belonging

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This article investigates the performance of Pacific identities on Twitter during a high-profile cultural and sporting event, Tonga and Australia's first-ever rugby league test match in late 2018. More than 9000 tweets were analysed using quantitative and qualitative methods to map different publics orienting to the event on Twitter, including a Pacific diasporic public that emerged through locative practices of identity and cultural performance. This study finds that Pacific users' tweets were differentiated by textual and visual cues, including the use of emojis as a paralanguage of Pacificness and a racialized visual discourse of 'Brownness', in ways that suggest an emerging Pacific counter-public. The findings discussed here further demonstrate the ways in which social media affordances enable the construction of race and ethnicity online, and the ways in which marginalised groups are using social media to create alternative public spheres. This study also demonstrates the importance of looking more closely at the different discursive practices within Twitter publics to both foreground marginalised groups' practice and de-Westernise social media studies.

Keywords: Pacific, identity, race, social media, Twitter

Introduction

This article articulates the construction and performance of Pacific¹ identities on social media by studying patterns in the real-time use of Twitter during Tonga and Australia's first-ever rugby league test match in late 2018. By tracing the ways in which different

groups performed their ‘publicness’ in and around a high-profile cultural and sporting event, it aims to expand our knowledge about communicative patterns and cultures of publicness on Twitter (Nessi and Bailey 2019, p. 516), and provide further evidence of the expression of racialised and ethnic identities online. By looking more closely at the discourse and in-group cues of Pacific users on Twitter, and the ways in which they construct and enforce a space of belonging, this article also provides evidence of an emergent Pacific diaspora counter-public online—and further demonstrates the value in disaggregating data in Twitter publics to better foreground the practices of marginalised groups and their forms of assembly online.

Pacific peoples and sport: Some context

Pacific communities comprise multiple linguistically, culturally, and geographically diverse and distinct ethnic groups (Tongan, Samoan, Fijian, Papua New Guinean and so on), including Indigenous communities in the Pacific Islands and diasporic communities in the urban Pacific rim of Australia, the United States of America (USA) and New Zealand, where there is a large Pacific population. There are important cultural and structural differences between Pacific groups, which reflect their different colonial and political/economic contexts and which present scholars with challenges when generating bounded categories of study to account for the increasing diversity of Pacific experience and identity. However, while noting that Pacific cultural identity is neither uniform nor homogenous (Macpherson, Spoonley and Anae 2001)², this study draws on Pacific

peoples' own sense of connection; many share common genealogical and cultural links that have become a basis for collective identity, especially in Pacific rim settings where solidarity with other Pacific peoples has provided a sense of security in the context of being the smaller 'other' to more numerous and politically dominant groups (Ross 2017a). Among diasporic Pacific peoples there is an emerging shared identity that is increasingly global in its orientation (Lopesi 2018), and among Pacific athletes in the professional sporting codes of rugby union and rugby league, scholars have noted a shared identity that transcends national boundaries and ethnic group identities (Grainger 2006; Panapa and Phillips 2014)³. Indeed, McDonald and Rodriguez (2014, p. 237) argue that these codes have created a space for Pacific athletes to 'connect to the Pacific diaspora and to develop an identity that resonates with this diaspora'.

Though Pacific identities are increasingly defined through an emergent network of transnational and diasporic linkages, they are also grounded in and structured by complex histories of global capitalism, Pacific labour migration and colonialism (Lopesi 2018). Rugby and rugby league are cultural artefacts of British imperialism, and the high levels of Pacific representation within these codes is a complex outcome of imperialism and the rise of the global media sport complex (Horton 2012). The globalisation and professionalisation of rugby codes has created significant pathways of opportunity and social mobility for Pacific sports labour – and significant migration

within and between rugby-playing nations (Horton 2012; McDonald and Rodriguez 2014). In both Australia and New Zealand, where Pacific peoples have emerged as a substantial cohort of the rugby and rugby league codes (Lakisa, Adair and Taylor 2014), Pacific athletes are a key focal point for Pacific narratives of cultural pride, agency and communal mana⁴ or status (Horton 2012; McDonald and Rodriguez 2014; Teaiwa 2016). In Australian media, discourses about ‘Pacificness’ tend to focus narrowly on rugby league (Hawkes 2018), which is indicative of both the sport’s popularity in Australia—rugby league is the second most popular spectator team sport behind AFL/Aussie Rules (Hawkes 2018, p. 319)—and the fact that Pacific peoples make up a disproportionately high percentage of its players. While accounting for just over one per cent of the Australian population, Pacific players comprise 42 percent of all professional contracts in the country’s National Rugby League (NRL) and almost 50 percent of junior registered players.

While the migration phenomenon of Pacific rugby and league players can be, and is, viewed by many Pacific families as positive and self-determined, Lopesi (2018, p. 66) notes that to some extent it has also been involuntary, shaped by complex forces of global capitalism and colonialism in ways that often reinforce the marginalisation and racialisation of Pacific peoples. Historically, Pacific Islands teams have been

consigned to the periphery by the rugby codes' dominant powers (Dewey 2014); the 2018 Tonga v Australia match-up was not only the first ever test held between the two countries, Fiji was also campaigning hard at the time to get a team included in Australia's NSW Rugby League to build a pathway to international competitions. In addition, Pacific players within Western nations have often been treated as the exotic ethnic 'other' to colonialism's normative Pākehā⁵ whiteness (ibid; Grainger 2006), further underlining the minority status of Pacific peoples, especially in the Australian and New Zealand-based diaspora (Teaiwa 2016). Within this broader context, the 2018 test match was freighted with meaning for Pacific and Tongan peoples.

The media and sporting event

The 2018 Mate Ma'a Tonga/Kangaroos test match was also significant as both a sporting spectacle and moment of Pacific visibility. The Tongan team, ranked fourth in the world at time of the test, had become the first tier-two team to beat a tier-one nation when it beat New Zealand to reach the semi-finals of the Rugby League World Cup in 2017, and it was still riding a wave of popularity in 2018. Tongan fans flew in from all over the world for the Auckland-based test match and the Tongan King Tupou VI declared a public holiday in Tonga to mark the team's achievements (Hopgood 2020). The team was also celebrated within New Zealand's other Pacific communities and became a focal point for a wider Pacific collective, including Pacific athletes, such as

the Fijian rugby league team which tweeted extensively about the Tongan team and pan-Pacific unity as part of its campaign for inclusion in Australia's professional competition.

The test match itself was significant as the first ever test match between Tonga and Australia, and for playing to a sold-out crowd⁶ in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The Tongan team's arrival in Auckland, a city described as the largest Polynesian city in the world (Cave, Ryan and Panakera 2003), was described in news headlines as a 'homecoming' (NRL.com 2018) and their tour was, arguably, a mega-event (Real 2013, p. 37) for Pacific diasporic communities. Tongan supporters flew in from around the world to attend the game, entire streets were decorated in the red and white of Tonga's national colours, and media hype around local and visiting Tongan supporters and the city's 'sea of red', where whole neighbourhoods were awash in Tongan flags and banners in the weeks leading up to the test, arguably outweighed focus on the actual game.

Sporting events feature among the most popular topics on Twitter (Highfield, Harrington and Bruns 2013, p. 249), making them an obvious choice of study for media scholars. Because this event pulled together different groups—sports fans, media, diasporic Pacific communities and others—it is a useful case study for exploring the

overlapping ways of being public online (Matheson 2017). More than that, the event provides an opportunity to investigate Pacific peoples identity performance during a significant moment of Pacific visibility. The Mate Ma'a Tonga tour was a key occasion for marking the 'public culture' of Tongan and Pacific communities and is, thus, a useful focus for exploring how communication practices of identity, culture and belonging intersect in a social media context across diaspora and beyond a nation-state lens (Halualani 2008). Lopesi (2018, p. 96) argues that Pacific diasporic publics are building a 'collective imagination' through digital media like Twitter to create a shared sense of identity across national and other spatial boundaries.

Twitter is a growing space for Moana peoples, specifically from the Tongan and Sāmoan communities in the US and Aotearoa diasporas, commonly known as Poly Twitter. Poly Twitter users discuss all manner of things, from current affairs and racism to colonisation, as well as light-hearted conversations using hashtags such as #YouKnowYourePolyWhen.... Through shared imagery, language and concerns, followers begin to interact across Moana diasporas, generating diasporic publics (ibid. p. 82).

This project views the publics studied during the Mate Ma'a Tonga event through a performative lens, as neither a stable entity nor space but as 'people acting out public cultural practices' (Matheson 2017, p. 587). Moreover, it draws on scholarship that shows that people seek out ethnic/racial identity and community online (Nakamura 2010; Nakamura and Chow-White 2012; Daniels 2013; Lopesi 2018; Carlson and Frazer 2021) to understand Pacific peoples' communicative practices as constituting the discursive creation of community. By paying attention to the signifying and discursive

practices that construct, shape and position users in this dataset, this study examines how Pacific identity and community is shaped by and brought into being through digital communication (Witteborn 2019), and builds on existing scholarship about the ways that racialisation and identity manifests in social media technologies (Nakamura and Chow-White 2012; Hargittai 2012; boyd 2012). It finds that Pacific users connected on Twitter via a discourse that ‘territorialised’ a Pacific public sphere within the broader Twitter public. Though this discursive space took shape within, and in open view of, a wider public, the racialised identity and cultural literacy required for membership clearly demarcated it as a space of Pacific assembly, providing further evidence of the ways in which marginalised groups use social media to create alternative public spheres.

Approaches to studying Pacific identities

Identity, particularly ethnic identity, is understood here as a performance (Butler 1999) that is staged in relation to something or someone else (Ong 2009), but which is constrained by structural and discursive limits (Moore 2005, p.159), such as the hegemonic ideas and narratives from dominant and Pacific spaces. Identities are not necessarily constructed by those who are subject to them, nor are they constructed in a vacuum. The category of ‘Pacific’ in the New Zealand setting, for instance, generally has meaning only in relation to the (supposedly unitary) dominant category of Pākehā/European. As Hall observes (1989 in Gandhi 1998, p.125), ethnicity is typically

named as marginal or peripheral to the mainstream and acts to confirm hegemonic notions of dominance, so that Englishness, Pākehā-ness, or American-ness is rarely represented as ethnicity. What's more, 'Pacific', like 'Asian' or 'black', is not just a politically and culturally constructed category, but also a *racially* constructed category (Hall 1990, 1996, p. 443; Omi and Winant 1994, 2001). It draws on 'race'-based representations that operate ideologically to maintain existing power relations; most Pacific peoples cannot perform 'whiteness' (Willie 2003), and Pacific identity, like Latino or black identity, is often tied to a visible identity (Alcoff 2005).

Halualani (2008, p. 6) argues that much of the research on diasporic communities has been done via an outsider's perspective and not from within the perspective of the cultural group of focus, or it has been rooted to a specific geographic place and has not fully examined how cultural world views and identities have changed in the light of globalising forces. In the New Zealand setting, for instance, research has found that multi-ethnic identity and ethnic fluidity is pronounced among younger Pacific diasporic peoples (Carter et al. 2009; Kukutai and Callister 2009), and that Pacific youth are adopting pan-Pacific or 'Nesian' identities that depart significantly from their parents' and grandparents' migrant origins and traditions (Macpherson 2001; Fairbairn and Makisi 2003, p. 40; Borell 2005, p. 205; Teaiwa and Mallon 2005, pp. 210—211).

There is less research, however, on discourses of ‘Pacifinness’ (see Tiatia 1998; Southwick 2001; Luafutu-Simpson 2006; Brown Pulu 2007; Mila-Schaaf 2010) and how they are constructed, shaped, and shared across global and social media spaces.

Within communication studies, Tiara Na’Puti (2020) argues for a reprioritisation of orientations *from the Pacific*, not only to engage Indigenous knowledges, but also to move beyond land centric or nation-bound logics to embrace perspectives that provide a sense of connected Oceania (echoing the seminal work of Epeli Hau’ofa [1998] and Albert Wendt [1976]). Such an orientation, she says, allows us to better understand the structures and cultures of contemporary colonial power and their profound impact on the discursive constructions and material conditions of the Pacific (Na’Puti 2020, p. 100).

Approaches to studying Twitter publics

Research on Twitter and sport shows that sport events have become a key catalyst for live tweeting and Twitter an important backchannel for audiences interacting around live sport (Highfield, Harrington and Bruns 2013; Highfield 2014; Hull and Lewis 2014). As well as being a significant sport event on Twitter, the Mate Ma’a Tonga tour and attendant fan activities drew considerable media interest: the test match itself was broadcast live across multiple channels and international audiences, while various fan

events in the fortnight leading up to the match were reported widely. Indeed, media hype about the Tongan team's Pacific fans and the tour's meaningfulness as a marker of Pacific culture arguably outweighed the importance of the actual game (Real 2013), making it more like a spectacle or mega-event and, thus, a notable case study.

This study draws on the work of social media scholars (Bruns and Stieglitz 2012; Bruns et al. 2016) to analyse the publics who were interacting on Twitter around the sport spectacle via #MMT and related hashtags⁷. Scholars have understood Twitter publics variously as a collection of highly individualised actors (Schmidt 2014); as a more connected, though ad hoc collective emerging in relation to specific issues or events (Bruns 2008; Bruns and Burgess 2011); as an affective public that comes together through strong emotional response to an issue (Parsloe and Campbell 2020); as intentionally activist or oppositional publics (Medden 2020); or as something more 'inchoate', neither a personal public nor a public that emerges around a particular issue, but one that coheres through a set of practices (Matheson 2017). The public that coalesced around the Mate Ma'a Tonga tour and test match was ostensibly a hybrid of intersecting groups—a general audience who may not have been that interested in rugby league per se but who were there for the spectacle, a long-term rugby league fan community, and a diverse community of Tongan and Pacific diaspora, which included sport fans and non-fans and, likely, members of an emerging Poly Twitter—and as such

provides a useful snapshot for examining people's multiple overlapping ways of being public (Matheson 2017, p. 595).

A separate but growing body of research, which points to the ways that people seek out and enact ethnic and racial identities and community on social media (boyd 2012; Hargittai 2012; Witteborn 2019), suggests the need to attend more closely to the ways in which Twitter publics are racially or ethnically segmented. Hargittai's work (2012) shows that people use social network sites (SNS) differently based on their 'race' and ethnicity, but those differences do not show up in aggregated SNS research models and require, instead, a more user-centric approach to tease out specific uses of social media and social media affordances. Costa (2018) and Blommaert and Szabla (2020) argue that we need to shift our analytical focus from online communication in general to more specific forms of action to better distinguish groups (or publics) on social media. In this respect, an affordances approach (Ellison and Vitak 2015; Costa 2018) is useful here for teasing out contextual variations in the #MMT dataset, and the ways in which Pacific users 'tweeted' themselves into collective being.

By providing a large dataset of Pacific users' interactions, the Mate Ma'a Tonga event affords an opportunity to investigate the real-time performative aspects of identity and publicness on social media. Ethnic and racial identity is a powerful structuring concept in people's digital interactions (Nakamura 2010; Hargittai 2012; boyd 2012;

Daniels 2013; Graham and Smith 2016, p. 446) particularly on social media, where marginalised groups are afforded a visibility and ability to narrativise their identity in ways that do not exist in dominant media (Hatef 2020). As a Twitter dataset, the #MMT case study offers an opportunity to examine identity discourse in closer detail, as the flattening of Twitter's audience requires users to work harder to select specific addressees and segment personal networks (Lingel, Naaman and boyd 2014; Blommaert and Szabla 2020). In addition, the Pacific users who coalesced around the #MMT events comprised multiple ethnic groups and languages, and, as such, had to find creative ways to establish a shared language and communicative common ground on Twitter. In this respect, the #MMT event provides a useful dataset for examining how ethnic and racial identities are constructed through Twitter's paralanguage of textual and visual affordances, such as hashtags and emojis (Ellison and Vitak 2015; Bai et al. 2019).

By drawing on Couldry's (2004) 'media as practice' approach, an affordances approach, and a cultural and performative view of publicness, this study aims to look more closely at the ways in which users' curate their identities, communities and publicness on Twitter—through verbal performance (Lingel, Naaman & boyd 2014), contextualisation cues (Blommaert and Szabla 2020), locative practice (Ross 2017b) and other displays of cultural competence (Florini 2014). By looking more closely at how groups are produced through different communication practices, it also aims to dig

beneath higher-level patterns of social media behaviour (Ellison and Vitak 2015) to foreground Pacific peoples' communication patterns, and thereby extend scholarly efforts to de-Westernise social media research.

Methodology

The study is based on a collection of tweets from a two-week period in October 2018, from Wednesday 10 October when the Tongan rugby league team arrived in New Zealand to the team's departure on Wednesday 24 October. All data was collected through Twitter's public Filter API through searches for trending hashtags and keywords: Mate Ma'a Tonga, Tonga OR league, @tonganNRL, #MMT, #Tonga, and #rugbyleague. The final dataset comprised 9280 tweets containing hashtags or keywords relating to the Tongan team's historic match-up with the Australian national rugby league team. Several tools, including Gephi, R and Tableau, were used to combine qualitative and quantitative analysis of tweets. A basic social network analysis of the retweet network was conducted, using methods established by Twitter corpus researchers Bruns and Stieglitz (2012) and Bruns and Burgess (2012), to identify broad clusters of Twitter users in the dataset, their 'communities' of interaction, and key participants. Further analysis of user activity and visibility using a series of metrics suggested by Bruns and Burgess (2012), and focused on original tweets, @mentions, retweets, URL tweets and hashtags, was used to identify communicative patterns, such

as who the most prominent users were and how, what content received the most attention, and how discussion unfolded over time and for different communities.. Key users' tweets were then read closely via qualitative, manual⁸ content analysis, using a grounded theory method, to identify key themes and issues.

As the analysis below demonstrates, the Mate Ma'a Tonga dataset gathered together different communities and in that respect it is, as Matheson says (2017 p. 591), a constructed phenomenon; no user will have seen all 9280 tweets in the dataset and no two users are likely to have had the same Twitter experience. The data capture did not include quote tweets (where original tweets are embedded in a retweet as a graphic), and analysis was based on a simple code for sorting tweets: a tweet might be a retweet and @mention at the same time, but was coded on its primary syntax as either an original tweet, retweet or @mention. That risks oversimplifying the data, but for the purposes of this exploratory, observational study provides an indicative summary of key patterns in the Twitter discussion. There are other limitations with the approach taken here. Though Twitter is in many ways a 'public square', it is not a big one. US data suggests it is used by little more than one in five people, and those who use it tend to differ from the wider population (Wojcik and Hughes 2019). Moreover, tweets collected with the Filter API are unlikely to represent all related activity on Twitter (Brantner and Pfeffer 2018, p. 82); the community of users represented in this study represents only

those who followed and participated in a particular hashtag and keyword conversation, and is inevitably skewed given many Twitter users do not use hashtags (Marwick 2014, p. 116), and everyday Twitter use is generally distributed across a much wider range of activities, primarily follower/follower exchanges (Bruns & Moe 2014; Bruns et al. 2016). This project captured keywords as well as hashtags in an attempt to broaden the study beyond hashtag communication (Bruns et al. 2016), but will have missed the follow-on and user-to-user conversations that ‘hang off’ hashtag or keyword tweets (Bruns and Burgess 2011, p. 21). As Bruns and Moe note (2014, p. 24), hashtag and keyword activity ‘does not tell the full story of how Twitter and its users respond to a given event or engage with a given topic’. As such, this dataset is understood as a fragment of wider conversation.

Nonetheless, since the aim of this study was to investigate publicness on social media, searching hashtags was useful for capturing more public and fewer personal Twitter conversations. More than half of the tweets in the dataset (5343) were public in character through their use of the #MMT hashtag, as were two-thirds of tweets (6270), which were retweets. The degree of publicness is an important consideration given the blurring of the personal and public on Twitter (franzke et al. 2020), and an ethics of care demands that we attend to the potential harm of using and publicising tweets in ways that were not considered by their authors (franzke 2020). It is not possible for a big-data

project such as this to seek users' informed consent. However, in line with ethical standards to protect posts as anonymous or pseudo-anonymous (ibid.), attempts have been taken to protect users' privacy by storing data on password protected computers, and de-identifying users by avoiding republication of potentially searchable posts, paraphrasing post content, and anonymising users throughout.

Extra effort was taken, too, to consider the needs of Pacific peoples who are a minority group in New Zealand, where the test match was held, and in Australia and the USA where many Twitter users were based. Analysis was grounded as much as possible in Pacific perspectives and in a way that valued and foregrounded Pacific voices (Anae 2010). Moreover—and, crucially for me as a researcher who identifies as Pacific—I have aimed to generate knowledge and understanding not just about but also *for* Pacific peoples: by investigating Pacific social media practices, I hope to contribute to Pacific Studies with empirical evidence of Pacific identity work in digital and diasporic spaces; and by investigating media practices in the south through a Pacific lens, I hope to contribute to building local theory.

Findings

The Twitter public that formed around the Mate Ma'a Tonga 2018 tour of Aotearoa New Zealand emerges as something of a hybrid – neither a personal public (Schmidt 2014) nor a more intentional or coherent issue public. Indeed, it is most like the

‘inchoate’ public described by Matheson (2017), within which appear more coherent and distinct publics. In the first instance, there is clear evidence here of a sport issue public, much like that identified elsewhere in the literature (Highfield, Harrington and Bruns 2013; Bruns, Weller and Harrington 2014; Highfield 2014; Bruns et al. 2016). It comprised an established network of sport fans, sports media, sport organisations and athletes who used Twitter during the Mate Ma’a Tonga tour as a backchannel for posting sport commentary and debating the finer points of the game, team selection and the wider rugby league competition.

Social network analysis further identified a second distinct, and bigger, public or cluster in the dataset, a Pacific public which is less well described in the literature. This public drew on a global diasporic network and a mix of Tongan and pan-Pacific identities and its users appear to behave differently to the more sport-oriented Twitter users, and more like the Poly Twitter described by Lopesi (2018, p.82). There was less debate and commentary about the test match, less sharing of media links, more blurring of the personal and public, and different patterns of talk, with more locative practices of identity through the use of humour, emphatic hashtags and emojis. No doubt there are overlaps between these loose groupings—indeed, there were individuals who bridged between the two—but based on users’ connections in the network, it is clear that there

were quite different publics orienting to the Mate Ma'a Tonga tour on Twitter, highlighting the need for less generalised theorising about social media publics.

Overall characteristics

Overall, the sample emerges as a relatively fragmented public with three main clusters: a diasporic Pacific and Tongan cluster, which appeared to be grassroots and international, pulling in users from New Zealand, Australia, the Pacific and the USA; a sport cluster, which appeared to be more Australia-based and dominated by sports media; and a Pacific advocacy cluster, comprising several Pacific politicians, academics and social justice advocates, that was more New Zealand-based. There was good evidence in the sample of a community of users in network terms (Bruns and Burgess 2012), with a high ratio of response posts (77.5 percent) to non-response posts (22.5 percent), and less evidence of a well-established elite of Twitter users. The top 1 percent of highly active users accounted for only 15 percent of discussion and did not dominate conversation, which makes this public more like a distributed hashtag public (Bruns and Burgess 2011; Bruns and Stieglitz 2012) and, as Matheson argues elsewhere (2017, p. 595), less like a traditional mass-mediated sphere.

Performances of Pacific identity

A closer examination of what was most shared on Twitter in relation to the Mate Ma'a Tonga tour reveals that it was not the tweets related to sport or breaking news that got most attention, but tweets that had more to do with celebrating and performing Pacific identities. The most retweeted posts in the dataset were not about the test match or even the athletes but about the Tongan and other Pacific communities who turned out visibly and vocally, both online and offline, to show support for and pride in Mate Ma'a Tonga and Pacific success.

The top retweeted posts from the game itself were about the Pacific community's presence and support, rather than the score, athlete performance or the game breakdown. One contained video of a crowd of jubilant Mate Ma'a Tonga supporters, another a photo of a packed stand of supporters with the hashtag #ProudTongan, while the top retweeted post (which included a video of the crowd singing a Tongan hymn, followed immediately by a Mate Ma'a Tonga try)⁹ was about supporters spurring on the Mate Ma'a Tonga team. In the lead-up to the test match, the most retweeted tweets were characterised by Pacific pride and belonging. One, showing a soldier posing with the Tongan flag at different locations overseas and posting 'For the Culture.[Tongan flag emoji] #MMT[raised fist emoji]', was typical of tweets that performed the global nature of Pacific community and support. In these instances, pride can be understood not just as an emotion but also a performative practice—it performs

membership to the collective via identity affirmation and belonging, and performs identity by highlighting users' Pacific characteristics, often in relation to other social categories (Brunelle 2020).

An analysis of secondary hashtags used over the fortnight reveals similar expressions of Pacific pride and belonging, as well as contextualisation cues that required cultural literacy to 'get' their meaning (Kanai 2016) and, thereby, assumed an ideal Pacific reader. Where sports-focused users, particularly sports media and sports organisations, tended not to use hashtags in their posts, Pacific users more consistently used the #MMT hashtag and a range of secondary hashtags denoting Pacific identities, for example #ProudTongan, #PolynesianPower, #Polypride, #Pacific, #OnePasifika, #PacPol, #tokouso and #Cheehooo. Significantly, many of these hashtags display a cultural meaning or discourse that not only performs a Pacific identity but also constructs spatial boundaries of belonging and solidarity. They serve as demarcation tools for ruling in or out an intended audience depending on shared experience and cultural references.

Notably, these secondary hashtags also address a broader Pacific identity (and not just Tongan users) in ways that are rooted in the diasporic perspectives of the Pacific Rim. #tokouso, for example, is a portmanteau of the Tongan and Samoan words

for brother and is a slang term used by urban diasporic Tongans and Samoans to portray unity between the two groups. The collective addressivity (Koven 2020) of such tags demonstrates the ways in which Twitter's textual affordances are used to both affirm bonds that transcend ethnicity and national solidarities (Witteborn 2019) and to select and segment specific Pacific addressees (Blommaert and Szabla 2020). As such, they confirm Twitter's usefulness as a site for studying the production, reproduction and circulation of contemporary pan-Pacific (supra-national, multi-ethnic and diasporic) identities.

Mememes and similar user-generated content (UGC) have been noted elsewhere as key mechanisms through which users construct belonging on social media (Kanai 2016). Analysis of the top-20 retweeted posts in the #MMT dataset reveals further evidence of the ways in which Pacific identity was performed—and an in-group constructed—through contextualisation cues and humour rooted in the socio-historical and racialised experience of an urban 'Brown' Pacific diaspora (Ross 2020a) and transnational solidarities of Indigenism and marginalisation (Goodale 2006; Allen 2012). For instance, a video parody of diasporic Samoans watching the Tongan v Australia test played on the notion that intra-Pacific rivalries, in this case between Tongans and Samoans, are erased when faced with a non-Pacific out-group, i.e. Australia, thereby showcasing how cultural groups live between an original homeland

and a new one *and* ‘in between and in remembrance of’ different nations and their colonial pasts (Halualani 2008, p. 19).

Another post, the fourth most retweeted in the dataset, drew on New Zealand’s controversial dawn raids on Pacific immigrants’ homes and workplaces in the mid-1970s to hail as ‘the people’s hero’ a Mate Ma’a Tonga fan, dressed in red as DC Comics figure The Flash and holding a sign ‘2 FAST 4 IMMIGRATION’. These posts assume an ideal reader—a Pacific addressee—with the social knowledge and politics to ‘get the joke’ (Kanai 2016, p. 10), and thereby communicate subtle group boundaries within Twitter’s broader public. By posting and retweeting in these ways, users deployed markers of identity that assumed a shared experience as marginalised ‘other’, and a racial understanding of the world that ruled out Pālagi/Pākehā (Europeans) as their addressees. Their posts also appear to be rooted in the conditions and circumstances of the diasporic urban Pacific Rim context, in that they imagined pan-Pacific not just Tongan identities, and transnational rather than ‘traditional’ Pacific identities, thereby providing evidence of the ways in which globalising forces, including technological transformation, are changing cultural world views and identities by extending and changing what it means to wear a nationally bound identity such as ‘Tongan’ or ‘Sāmoan’ in diasporic contexts (Halualani 2008; Carlson and Frazer 2021).

Figure 1. Top 20 tweets by retweet.

The recurring use of emojis by Pacific users was also performatively different to that of sport-oriented users, and notably racialised, further demonstrating how emoji use is related to cultural background (Bai et al. 2019). Pacific users frequently tweeted emojis, such as faces with tears of joy, grinning faces, red hearts and smiling faces with heart eyes, which they used to convey humour and Tongan and Pacific pride, and to emphasise emotion. Typically, users posted several emojis in a tweet, with the most-used emoji, the Tongan flag, often used to create emojiograms, such as spelling out the word 'Tonga' pictorially with dozens of Tongan flags. It was also used to stand in as a visual rather than textual hashtag, raising interesting issues for SNS designers (who have yet to afford the same curatorial properties to imagery as they have to hashtags) and social media researchers, who might further explore the relative use of textual and visual tags among different groups and the ways in which marginalised groups find workarounds or new uses of a platform's affordances to perform identity (Cirucci 2017).

Significantly, there was a recurring use of emojis within the Pacific clusters and across the different Pacific ethnic groups that could be identified (e.g., Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islands Māori, Fijian) to signify a racialised Pacific solidarity through brown-

skinned raised fists, bumping fists, flexed biceps, hands folded in prayer, raised hands and shaka hand signals. These emojis were used to denote Tongan *and* Pacific identities and, often, a pan-Pacific unity. Some also drew on broader Pacific cultural references, such as the raised fist, signifying a racialised resistance that recalls the American Black Power and New Zealand Polynesian Panther movements and a shared experience of white, Western colonisation.

The colour of these emojis is interesting. Twitter's default colour for emojis is *Simpsons* yellow, but the platform allows users to use a limited range of skin tones on some emojis, from 'pale white' to 'darkest brown'. Pacific users (unlike other users in the dataset) made a deliberate choice to select and use brown-skinned emojis in their tweets, thereby drawing on corporeal as well as cultural frames to reproduce a racialised ethnic identity online, and to flag their belonging to a communal and similarly racialised Pacific identity. As in the offline world (Carlson and Frazer 2021), these identities are constructed and performed within the overlapping contexts of colonialism, globalisation, and marginalisation—the historical white, Western colonisation of Pacific nations; the contemporary regional role of Australia and New Zealand as major political tigers rooted in white, Western modernity; and the overwhelming whiteness of global media channels—which serve to shape and reinforce the racialisation of Pacificness as 'Brown-ness'. What is significant here, however, is how an identity that is usually read

on the body (Pacificness as ‘Brownness’) is performed discursively on Twitter. By constructing their online identities through visual discourses of ‘race’ (Chow-White 2006), Pacific users appear to be using the affordances of Twitter in quite different ways to other communities in this dataset, which not only merits further study but may also suggest their use as boundary-marking cues in the construction of ethnic or race-based online communities and publics (Nakamura and Chow-White 2012; Daniels 2013).

Divergent communicative spaces

There were also differences in the #MMT dataset in the ways that different groups shared media content, such as URL links or embedded media objects. Overall, the most-shared URLs linked almost exclusively to sports stories in mainstream and specialist sports media, and were tweeted mostly by sports journalists and their media organisations as part of disseminating news work or ‘marketing the news’ (Hermida 2013; Tandoc and Vos 2015; Ross 2020c). This stands in sharp contrast to Pacific users in the #MMT network, who mostly linked to ordinary users’ social media posts (often humorous memes) about Tongan and Pacific cultural experiences, identity and pride. Pacific users’ also privileged ordinary ‘produser’ (Bruns 2007) or citizen journalism user-generated content (UGC), which hints at an emerging self-sufficiency among Pacific users who have been shown elsewhere (Ross 2017a, 2017b, 2021) to be both mistrustful of and marginalised by mainstream media. For instance, one of the top-ten

most-used secondary hashtags in the sample, #livepost, was used by Pacific users posting eyewitness and ‘news-like’ content from fan events and the test match, including two users who livestreamed from the test match via Periscope. Of interest here is not just that Pacific users took on the role of quasi-journalists to report on events but that, when coupled with their privileging of grassroots UGC content, there are hints of a diverging discursive arena that is almost counterpublic-like (Graham and Smith 2016). Arguably, these patterns of more proactive and do-it-yourself ‘producer’ practices (Bruns 2007) suggests Pacific users were using Twitter as an alternative space to build their own narratives away, though not entirely separate, from dominant spaces.

Discussion

By looking more closely at specific communicative practices in the Mate Ma’a Tonga network, we see evidence of segmentation whereby Pacific users’ identity practices start to solidify as a ‘parallel discursive arena’ (Fraser 1990). It would be a stretch to call this space a counterpublic; it was not highly organised, it had no obvious activist mission, and it was not entirely separate (Graham and Smith 2016, p. 436). Yet it was distinct and coherent enough, particularly in terms of its identity discourse, to indicate a virtual community and a cyberspace or place (Davis 2020) from which a counterpublic could emerge. Interestingly, unlike dedicated websites like Pacific-oriented blogs or community media (Franklin 2004), this cyberplace is discursively constructed *within* a

larger, dominant public sphere. Pacific users' talk is open to view and anyone, if they chose, could join the discussion—but, by using culturally specific discourse, including visual signs, users produced a sense of collective belonging and solidarity and effectively drew a spatial boundary that regulated community membership. One might imagine it as the digital equivalent of rolling out the grass mat in a corner of a town's main square to flag a separate space of assembly. Further longitudinal research might test whether – and how – this cyberspace solidifies over time as a more distinct public sphere in which users form and maintain relationships (Nakamura 2010). Comparative SNS research might further examine the extent to which similar discursive spaces exist in other online contexts—particularly as more Pacific people adopt ICTs and social media (Ross 2020b)—and whether and how they differ given the specific constraints and affordances of each online environment.

The usefulness of an affordances approach is underlined here by the finding that Pacific users' interactions were differentiated by their use of Twitter's textual *and* visual affordances, particularly hashtags and emojis. Where the various Mate Ma'a Tonga-related hashtags allowed those with a shared interest in the tour and test match to come together on Twitter, the use of culturally specific hashtags (e.g., #tokouso) and visual cues, both as a contextualising tool (e.g., the Tongan flag emoji) and paralinguistic of racialised Pacific identity (e.g., brown-skinned emoji), enabled Pacific

users to direct their posts to more specific addressees. These visibility affordances enabled users to symbolically demarcate and reinforce membership of a Pacific collective identity and reveal ways of being and relating online that help to expand our understanding of the ways in which people form and reaffirm their ethnic and racial identity, and seek out community, online (Daniels 2013)—and how they do so across transnational and diasporic linkages that are neither firmly fastened to a specific geographic space, nor a singular ethnic social formation (Halualani 2008).

Taken as a whole, these patterns of identity performance and connection in Pacific people's Twitter use might be theorised in terms of locative practice (Ross 2017a, 2017b) and identity negotiation. Pacific users were focused here not solely on rugby league or the *Mate Ma'a Tonga v Australia* game, but also on their relationships to one another and the world around them, their visibility and meaningfulness as a Pacific collective, their ties to community and pride in a shared identity. Research on Pacific people's media practices generally has described these communicative practices of 'belongingness' as locative (Ross 2017a, 2017b), that is, as strategic practices of identity and connection that are tightly intertwined with Pacific cultural ideas of interrelationship and community, and the structural and discursive contexts of colonisation, globalisation, and contemporary diasporic experiences.

This study expands that work by demonstrating the salience of Brown identities in Pacific users' social media networks, their use of emojis as a visual discourse of Pacificness/Brownness, and the ways in which users claimed and signified their belonging to Tongan and Pacific identities through performances that were tailored to Twitter's affordances, particularly via emphatic hashtags (which reflected Pacific languages and cultural references) and emojis. These various findings are important, as they provide further evidence of the powerful presence of the politics of identity—and the performance of self-defined hybrid ethnic identities (Pacificness/'Brownness')—in Pacific people's media practices (Ross 2017a). The aim here is not to provide a comprehensive account of the ways people are being 'Pacific' on social media but rather, as Carlson and Frazer argue in their study of Indigenous digital life (2021, p. 13), to provide a snapshot of some of the ways Pacific peoples are using social media to extend and change identities, thereby building on existing scholarship on the ways that identity manifests in social media (boyd 2012; Hargittai 2012; Nakamura and Chow-White 2012). In addition, by foregrounding the identity work of a transnational diaspora within a southern context and a Pacific frame, it also aims to contribute to the de-Westernisation of social media studies (Costa 2018).

Given, much of the behaviour of the Pacific public identified here cannot be easily captured via quantitative methods, the findings also suggest a need to further

refine methodologies to combine the large-scale quantitative analysis needed for studying social media networks with the qualitative methods needed to understand the performative practices of social media users and publics. In this respect, an affordances-in-practice approach (Costa 2018) is a useful starting point for teasing out contextual variation and the more specific—and differentiated—communicative practices and groups within larger aggregated social media publics. Big data studies have at times proved inadequate to capturing users' cultural, racial, and ethnic contextualisation practices (Hargittai 2012; Brantner and Pfeffer 2018) and a practice-based, user-centric approach is likely to prove more useful for understanding ethnic minority and Indigenous users' specific and situated practices.

Alongside the need for more empirical research on Pacific peoples' uses of digital media and transnational media practice, there is also a need for more research that can help build local theory (Ross 2020b). There has been little research on contemporary Pacific communities' social media practices, and more work is needed—work that is grounded in Pacific worldviews, the specific locale of the wider Pacific region, and the specific contexts of colonialism and globalisation—to better understand the role of identity and culture in shaping the potential and actual role of social media for Pacific and other marginalised groups. It is hoped that this study may contribute to that scholarly project.

¹ The collective terms used to describe people who are from or who descend from South Pacific island nations.

² Pacific identity is understood here as complex and multi-layered (often existing in tandem with other identities), and continually constructed at different moments by different structures, for different ends (Halualani 2000, p. 597).

³ It also tends toward a gendered and racialised performance of Pacific masculinity. Unpacking the gender constructs and masculinities involved is beyond the scope of this article but indicates a need for further research on Pacific communication practices of identity in relation to 'race', gender and sports.

⁴ I follow Na'Puti (2019, p.498) and others in not differentiating Indigenous language terms with italics to avoid 'othering' these terms.

⁵ European or New Zealander of European descent.

⁶ Auckland's Mt Smart Stadium had a capacity 26,500 crowd for the Tongan v Australia match; the test between New Zealand and Australia a week earlier attracted less than half that number (NZ Herald 2018).

⁷ Research has tended to focus on the use of hashtags, which allow anyone and not just followers to read a user's tweets, and as performances of deliberative publicness they are a useful focus for this study.

⁸ As argued by Brantner and Pfeffer (2018, p.89), automated content analysis methods are unsuitable for understanding the cultural, contextual, and linguistic complexity of tweets, or for analysing multilingual datasets such as this one.

⁹ It was retweeted 264 times and garnered more than 600 likes.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1: Top 20 tweets by retweet.