

How to Disappear Completely: Linguistic Anonymity on the Internet

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Facebook's much debated [Real Name policy](#), which seeks to reduce online anonymity, has put personal privacy and identity issues back in the spotlight of life on the Internet. User accounts with so-called 'non-official' names have fallen foul of the stentorian push to merge real life and virtual life into one consistently trackable identity. This is regardless of the individual situation, whether for identity expression or safety from harassment, which affects a diverse group users, from [gender non-conforming folk](#) to those facing online bullying and abuse.

Ostensibly, the push to cancel anonymous accounts actually seeks to reduce verbal abuse and online fraud by holding the perpetrators accountable in real life. The consequences of this is a little more nuanced in reality. For some, having a single identity regardless of the medium means a trivial conflation of public profiles and may simply be a convenience. For many others however, anonymity is a necessary part of navigating the wild and woolly frontiers of the Internet safely. Anonymity on the Internet can be a handy advantage for minority voices to be heard without the fear of intimidation.

The debate raises a number of interesting questions: Is online anonymity even linguistically feasible? Is language use on the Internet always gendered? Can male and female speakers be detected through their communication styles?

It was not so long ago that [Blizzard Entertainment faced a similar backlash from gamers for their Real ID policy](#), forcing their users to expose their real life identities on forums and often to a more immediate danger of harassment, particularly if they were female gamers. Gaming while female has been historically fraught with pitfalls, not least of which can be [real-life violent threats](#), as the recent [Gamergate controversy](#) showed.

A Kotaku article, [I'm an Anonymous Woman Gamer](#) discusses how avoiding abuse has become a regular part of women's online routines: "You do not share the fact that you're female. [...] Despite the fact that I play solely female characters, everyone assumes that you're male. And when you play these games, you just let people assume you're male, because it's easier.[...] there's this feeling [...] if you get creepy responses, you were sort of just asking for it— just by mentioning you're female."

This is despite the fact that, reportedly, "A 2006 statistic from the Consumer Electronics Association revealed that women ages 25-34 were out-playing men in "casual" (non-console) games by 30 per cent. Three years later, a Nielsen report would find that women over age 25 make up the largest constituency of gamers in the United States. And in the UK, women have been projected as made up 48 per cent of World of Warcraft players." Even so, the gaming world feels overwhelmingly male-dominated, such that gender anonymity is a necessary defense for some women. Linguistically speaking, as another anonymous female gamer advises in the article: "The first rule is: try to avoid pronouns."



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Avoid pronouns? For such small words, pronouns seem to have become hugely important on the Internet, where [nobody knows you're a dog](#).

How does one avoid using gendered pronouns without making it too obvious that you're trying to avoid them? It's a tricky problem.

We've discussed before how [those who identify as genderqueer or transgender have explored the use of newly created gender neutral pronouns](#) as a way of expressing their gender identities, such as the well-known online Spivak pronouns *e/em/eir*. But the use of these types of pronouns would be far too marked and politicized for those users wishing to fly anonymously under the radar and would invite comments rather than deflect them.

[Studies have discussed](#) how [the advent of the 'egalitarian' Internet](#) has allowed for [the anonymous expressions of online gender](#), often by 'gender-switchers' who may choose to role-play as a different gender from their real life presentation. In these cases roleplayers have to overtly choose a set of gendered pronouns to maintain their deception of a different online identity. This essentially is not very different from deliberately choosing to use new forms of pronouns. It makes a particular statement and invites certain consequences and reactions.

[Lori Kendall's 1998 paper](#) discusses how a particular male roleplayer online, Fred, has "to be obsessive about using female pronouns" otherwise "if one isn't exceedingly careful, one slips just slightly and the entire game is up." In this gender performance, Fred relies on "stereotypical notions of femininity in order to accomplish his masquerade" including a feminine seeming username. It is this extreme caricature of femininity that enables the male roleplayer to 'pass' as more realistically female than Kendall's (naturally or more neutrally female) online representation, which is assumed to be male by default. It's complicated.

[Pamela J. Cushing \(1996\)](#) posits that "women's relative invisibility on-line and on the frontiers of the Net [...] is in part a direct result of female communication styles" largely "because the prevailing language resemble[s] the male-oriented style of communication."

So according to researchers, men and women do talk differently and the language of the Internet is biased towards male discourse styles. Cushing further argues that "in the net environment, females thus have an extra burden of learning new, male conversational rituals if they want to effectively get heard."

[Daniel H. Rellstab's 2007 study on staging gender online](#) states that "linguists in particular have shown that 'real-life' gender leaves traces online in the form of discourse styles and patter" and observes that there is indeed "an overall pattern: women use more neutral and affectionate verbs, more emoticons and laughter. They would signal support for and appreciation of the others. Men, by contrast, would make more sexual references and evaluative judgments, and use more violent verbs. And they would insult others rather than show appreciation of their presence."

Okay so what does this mean? Does this suggest that regardless of what pronouns you choose to use, your discourse style will mark you for your "real-life" gender?

Is it essentially impossible to be gender anonymous on the Internet?

Well, not quite. Though the research says that men and women have tendencies towards different discourse styles on the Internet, [with women tending to prioritize their place in a network, while men prioritize their place in a hierarchy](#), these are just cultural tendencies.

In practice, [what seems to be happening](#) is that women who do not exhibit extremely stereotypical feminine ways of speaking are automatically assumed to be male. This ends up being a dubious advantage for any anonymous female gamer who wishes to remain out of the spotlight with regard to gender. By expertly

wielding the more unmarked gender neutral pronouns such as *I*, *you* and the [singular *they*](#), it seems it is possible for women to disappear, largely because [women are arguably already invisible participants in male-dominated spheres online](#). Because pronouns like singular *they* more and more are being used unremarkably as gender-neutral, the gender of a user (perhaps problematically) can easily go unquestioned.

So, if a person wants to be linguistically anonymous, they can be. It is certainly understandable that for those who participate in the gaming world, avoiding extreme or ongoing harassment and misogyny would be ideal. But it is a little problematic that the more women downplay their gender to avoid online abuse, the more the fast growing number of female gamers will continue to feel like a tenuous minority in a medium that was once upheld as a truly egalitarian model for human communication.

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