“The implication for cultures-of-use is to expand our thinking to include the ontological possibility that it is not only humans who act on, with, and through technologies, but that technologies may also be acting on, with, and through us” (Thorne, 2016, p. 189).

In the previous chapter, I analysed the situated context of Soliya through its website, which represents its exterior public image that serves to promote and disseminate the project. Through this I showed how Soliya is intentionally designed to offer possibilities for doing ‘identity work’ on different levels, both in terms of situated identities (facilitators and participants) and transportable identities – with reference being made in particular to the identity categories of ‘Westerner’, ‘Muslim’ and ‘non-Muslim’, for these are the identities which the framing of the programme focusses on, and also imagined identities. Before exploring how participants orient to these situated and transportable identities through indexicality and relationality in Chapters 7 and 8, I am going to explore the affordances and constraints of the mediating technologies available for doing identity work in the situated context of this study.

In this chapter, I describe the closed areas of Soliya, that is the areas that only registered participants, alumni, and Soliya staff and facilitators have access to. There are two main components of this space, the Soliya community area with individual blogs for each participant and the meeting rooms where the participants meet for their weekly synchronous dialogue sessions. This chapter will provide an overview of the affordances and constraints of the mediating tools in these two spaces, with examples of how participants’ discourse and situated and/or transportable identities emerged first of all through asynchronous text and images in the blog, and then through synchronous text, video, and audio interactions in the meeting room. Like all communication
(Kern, 2015), the communication in these online spaces is multimodal, but for the purpose of analysis in this chapter I initially consider each mode separately, as advised by researchers on multimodality (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010).

6.1. The mediation principle


As explained in the theoretical framework (Chapter 3), the ‘mediation principle’ acknowledges the fact that in online environments, the technologies we use have a mediating effect on the interaction, the affordances, and constraints of the tools we use, and contribute to the meaning making process and also to the process of identity construction. The act of mediation thus does not merely facilitate, or complicate, processes, but it radically transforms them (Kern, 2014).

Mediating tools are not neutral and they do not simply ‘exist’, they are designed with specific purposes and aims which are reflected in the tools themselves. For example, Twitter was designed as an SMS-based communications platform to be used by friends for status updates1, hence the limit of 140 characters, as this was the limit that mobile carriers imposed. Even though it subsequently moved to a web platform, the character limit remained, ‘as a creative constraint’, according to the developers. As Twitter’s user base grew, they began to create new jargon and different ways of using the service, for example using the @ symbol to identify other users, or hashtags # to group messages and content into categories so users can more easily find relevant content. This example serves to illustrate how interactants can exercise agency as they use online tools. The relationship between tools and their users is, to a certain degree, reciprocal. This is why online interaction and identity construction should not be studied without a consideration of the tools being used to mediate the interaction.

1. [http://twitter.about.com/od/Twitter-Basics/a/The-Real-History-Of-Twitter-In-Brief.htm](http://twitter.about.com/od/Twitter-Basics/a/The-Real-History-Of-Twitter-In-Brief.htm)
Much of the early work around online identities focussed on the affordances that the anonymity of computer-mediated communication – a term which still now is often used to refer to text-only communication – for identity construction. Whilst the notions of identity construction and anonymity might appear to be complete opposites, in text-based computer-mediated communication, anonymity can actually play an important role in how identity is constructed, which would be much more difficult in face to face situations.

Interaction through webcams does not allow for the anonymity that text-based computer-mediated communication offers participants, but it is quite different from face to face communication in a physical space in many respects. Malinowski and Kramsch (2014) have called into question the authenticity of online interaction and in particular the ability of synchronous computer mediated communication and video-conferencing technology “to replicate offline, embodied interaction” (p. 4). I would argue, however, that in using these technologies for online interaction, the aim should not be to replicate face to face interaction, but rather to learn to communicate effectively and construct and negotiate identity positions in these environments which constitute authentic contexts in their own right (Develotte, Guichon, & Vincent, 2010). In much the same way as educators have gradually come to recognise text-based computer-mediated communication as a “high stakes, high frequency context for all manner of professional, academic and social activity” (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009, p. 803), so they soon will for audio and video-mediated communication.

Text-based computer-mediated communication in its diverse forms constitutes many different genres of written communication, which continue to use historically rooted text conventions and may share some characteristics of ‘traditional’ genres, but also develop their own distinct features. The same will soon be the case for audio-video-text mediated communication, which is increasingly being used in our networked lives. There are already many different audio-video conferencing tools, with a range of additional modes of communication: text chat, emojis, turn taking tools (such as the hand icon which can be clicked to indicate the desire to take the floor), shared whiteboards, shared images, presentation displays, and the list goes on. There are also many possible
configurations of participants (e.g. one to one, one to many, many to many) and different ‘genres’ of video-conference ranging from monologic lectures with text-based questions to board meetings, from medical consultations to transglobal political activist meetings to cite just a few. These online situated contexts and genres may share some features with their face to face equivalents but they will also differ considerably. In all of these online (and offline) sites there are both situated identities established by the ‘institutional’ context, but there are also individuals who may make relevant other aspects of their identities as the interaction unfolds, using the available meaning-making resources. The degree of agency they can have over their identity construction and negotiation depends in part on their understanding and mastery of the mediating tools available to them – which include language and also the technologies.

Malinowski and Kramsch (2014) look in particular at the dimensions of representation, time, and space in desktop videoconferencing and language learning contexts. They identify two aspects of synchronous computer mediated communication which are particularly salient in terms of representation as experienced by online language learners: framing and segmentation. Our experience of space, time, and the ‘real’ is moved to the plane of representation which we see through the ‘window’ of the computer screen, which frames or delimits what we – and others – see. Our sense of hearing is ‘segmented’ through earphones or speakers, and voices sometimes echo back and can have a disorienting effect. As regards time, through video-conferencing participants often experience ‘latency’, that is the time lag between the real time performance of an action and its representation on the screen, as well as gaps between sound and images, with interactants’ faces sometimes ‘freezing’.

The spaces which users can orient their attention to are multiple and include the online or virtual space in which the interaction takes place, the physical space surrounding the computer, or the ‘hors-champ’ (Guichon & Wigham, 2016), the ‘champ’, which is the screen space (which can make available several different online spaces in different windows), and other ‘places’ or geographic sites that interactants can refer to. This can make it difficult to disambiguate the gestures, expressions, and body language that are seen through the video
cameras during conversation. Furthermore, eye contact can be a problem as interlocutors must choose to look either at the partners’ on screen representation or at the camera (to feign direct eye contact). These “disjunctures in the flow of space and time profoundly affect the possibilities for heteroglossic language learning” (Malinowski & Kramsch, 2014, p. 6) in synchronous, multimodal telecollaboration, for they are seen to detract interactants’ attention from engagement in deeper negotiation of social and cultural meanings.

However, for some researchers, the multimodal (visual, audio, and textual) nature of such environments, in spite of its limitations, is regarded as beneficial to negotiation of meaning (see Chun & Plass, 2000). Furthermore, the impact of video on building a learning community, increasing confidence, and reducing isolation is largely recognised in the literature (see Guichon & Wigham, 2016; Hampel & Hauck, 2006; Hampel & Stickler, 2012), particularly for learners who are physically isolated from one another, and for whom video is perceived as being even more crucial in reducing the impact of the distance.

The way participants orient to modes can be an important part of their identity construction. Lamy (2012), for instance, found that in multimodal contexts participants can specialise particular conversational aims to different spaces on the screen or choose modes, and that the different modes used can thus reflect different images of the same person. In Lamy’s study, a content analysis of input of participants in a multimodal conversation showed that one participant’s input through the spoken channel was mainly asking for others’ opinions, whilst all text-chat inputs were language accuracy checks. This led to the hypothesis that face-saving issues were involved as regards self-representation, with the participant giving an image of himself as a confident English speaker in the audio mode, whilst using the text chat for more face-threatening activities such as asking for help with English forms. These findings are in line with Blake (2000), who found that learners chose the less face-threatening text chat over the voice chat to request help from the tutor.

As briefly outlined in Chapter 2, the emergence and phenomenal success of social networking sites have somewhat changed the dynamics and attitudes towards
anonymity because their main aim is for users to curate their identities and their personal, social, and/or professional networks\(^2\). Construction and negotiation of identities online has become a rich area of research and much of the recent work has focussed on the affordances of social networking sites and multimodal media used for engaging in ‘identity work’ (boyd, 2006; Buckingham, 2008). The profile page in particular is held to be key to the dynamic of interaction and identity construction in online communities (Harrison & Thomas, 2009), though the degree of authenticity of these profiles has been found to vary (boyd, 2008). Key aspects of self-presentation on social network profiles are visual self portrayals, through photos or avatars, and the articulation of friendship links (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 10).

The literature from the field of language learning and technology as regards online identities mainly regards identity construction in public sites and networks such as online discussion forums (Hanna & de Nooy, 2009), social networking sites (Chen, 2013; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Lam, 2000, 2006; Reinhardt & Chen, 2013), and gaming and fanfiction spaces (Sauro, 2014; Thorne, Sauro, & Smith, 2015). Much less work has been carried out in the educational contexts of online intercultural exchange projects which generally take place in closed, private spaces such as institutional platforms. These two different types of spaces, the public versus the private, the recreational versus the educational, have often been presented as a dichotomy, but this is an over-simplification. There are several projects which can be seen to lie at the interstices of the formal and informal sphere (Thorne, Sauro, & Smith, 2015), and Soliya could be seen as one of these.

### 6.2. Mediation and multimodality

The assumption underlying my discussion and analysis of identity work through technology-mediated interaction is that all interaction is multimodal (Kern, 2015, p. 223), even in face to face contexts. Technologies have simply added

\(^2\) This is not to say, however, that trolling is not also a phenomenon on social networks.
new modalities and channels of communication and multiplied the ways in which these can be combined as we engage in meaning making. Technologies can facilitate or favour different kinds of meaning making and identity work, they can also constrain them through the design of the tools themselves and the differential access to the means of production and reception of these meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

I will first offer some clarifications as regards the terminology I will be using since the concept of multimodality has been applied in different disciplinary areas. Since this study lies within the area of language learning and technology, I have chosen to adopt the terminology used in this field, as recently defined by Guichon and Cohen (2016), “Multimodality makes sensory information accessible in diverse semiotic modes and offers the opportunity to produce, comprehend and exchange information simultaneously through different channels” (p. 510). Mode, then, defines the type of semiotic representation (in this study I look at textual, oral, and visual) used to present information. Media (e.g. a video clip, or a conversation in video conferencing) are the technological means of inscription and production that shape the ways a message is conveyed and accessed. These can be static, dynamic, or interactive.

In Table 6.1, which is adapted from Guichon and Cohen (2016), I summarise the nature and temporality of the different media and the semiotic modes of the two environments I explore in this chapter: the Soliya community area with asynchronous blogs and the meeting rooms for synchronous audio-video sessions.

Table 6.1. Media and modes in this project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Temporality of the medium</th>
<th>Nature of the medium</th>
<th>Semiotic modes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual blog in the Soliya community area</td>
<td>Asynchronous</td>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Textual (written blog posts) and visual (photographs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video-conferencing meeting room for two hour synchronous sessions</td>
<td>Synchronous</td>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>Textual (text chat), oral (interlocutors’ voices), visual (webcam image of interlocutors)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.3. The Soliya community area: asynchronous identities

My starting point of analysis in this chapter will be the Soliya Community area, since this is the first space that participants come into contact with when they have registered for the programme. It is also where they first have to begin to ‘construct’ their identities, as upon registering for the project participants are asked to complete their personal blog.

6.3.1. Affordances of the blogs

The individual blog spaces include two key components for online identity formation (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008), that is the presentation of demographic information (name, birthday, photo, and so forth), and the potential for an audience. The most immediate audience here is their Soliya dialogue group (which consists of the ten people who will be interacting together over the seven week period) as the blogs are gathered together under a tab ‘My Group’ for all the group members to see. However, the whole Soliya community, which consists of all present and past Soliya participants and facilitators, is potentially able to see their blog posts.

The blog offers opportunities for identity construction in both visual and textual modes for writing on the blog, for instance, participants can post small thumbnail photos of themselves (which most members of the community do). However not all members of the Soliya group in this study have done so.

The first blog post that participants are asked to write has five informal questions they can choose to answer. The questions are as follows:

- Where are you from? What is it like there?
- How do you spend your time? What do you enjoy doing most?
- What do you want to be doing in ten years? Where do you want to live?
• If you were throwing a dinner party and could invite any four people in the world, who would you invite and why?

• Why did you decide to participate in this programme?

In terms of identity construction, these questions offer the participants several possibilities – they can choose to make relevant aspects of their transportable identities, such as their nationality/ies, but also other aspects which are related to their interests, ambitions, and also their motivations for taking part in this programme (which as we see later in the synchronous sessions contributes to the authenticity of their situated identity as a ‘Soliya participant’). Question 3 asks what they want to be doing in ten years, offering them the possibility to think about, and also share their imagined identities with others. At the time they write this blog post the participants have not yet ‘met’ their fellow group members, this blog post can thus be seen as their first presentation of themselves to their fellow group members and to their ‘imagined community’.

Responses to these questions from the members of the dialogue group varied in length and in terms of engagement with the questions, ranging from ‘monosyllabic’ responses to quite articulated responses to some of the questions which also allow the participants to give some insight into their personalities, for instance through humour.

It is worth noting that neither of the facilitators (Ranà and Jessica) have this information on their blogs, indeed neither of them published much information about themselves. This is in line with the situated identity of the facilitator – as somebody who is neutral and multipartial – and thus discloses little personal information about themselves.

6.3.2. Transportable identities

Participants orient to the first question about their place of origin in different ways, some explicitly indexing a strong sense of national identity and pride. Mohammed, for instance, writes “I’m from Egypt to me it’s heaven on earth”,

Francesca Helm
and he uses the visual mode to reinforce the text; the photo of himself indexes his national identity; in the background of the picture is a pyramid with the colours of the Egyptian flag painted on it (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1. Mohammed’s blog

Fadela also indexes a strong pride in her place of origin as she writes “I am from Palestine, the PARADISE of this Planet!” The theme ‘Palestine as Paradise’ is a strong motif in Palestinian collective memory and has been recurrent in Palestinian folk culture and popular and nationalist discourse for over six decades, since the Nakba (the ‘catastrophe’) that the Palestinians experienced as a result of the 1947-1948 Arab-Israeli War over the possession of Palestine (Matar, 2011, p. 25). In the other posts she makes on her blog, Fadela indexes her Palestinian identity by mentioning the ‘day of the land’ March 30th (which commemorates a moment in 1976 when Palestinian citizens marched across

3. Reproduced with kind permissions from © Soliya.
Galilee to protest Israel’s evacuation, confiscation, and enclosure of their land. Her blog posts also mention other recurrent themes in collective Palestinian memory such as the martyrs, and prisoners in Israeli jails.

Alef makes relevant that his home town, Sidi Bouzid, “a small agrarian village in the south” of Tunisia was home of the Tunisian ‘Jasmine revolution’. Sidi Bouzid is the town where the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi occurred in December 2010, which led to massive protests and the ousting of president Ben Ali in January 2011. Alef thus makes relevant not only place but also time, a historical moment since the project started less than two months after the ‘Jasmine revolution’ began in Tunisia. We will see in the following chapters the extent to which these aspects of their transportable identities, which are indexed in this first presentation through the asynchronous blog mode, emerge in their synchronous interactions with the group.

As regards the other participants, Thamena and Doja also comment on their places of origin, Amman, the capital of Jordan (“a lovely city with simple people and nice weather”), and Jordan (“it’s beautiful and nice”), but offering minimal information. Maawa, also from Jordan, does not make any additional comments as regards her origin.

Brendan specifies the town he is from in the U.S.A and says “It’s fun, you just have to look around”, and makes relevant his status as a full time student and also having a job. Jack and Deni both index their places of origin in the US as well as the location of their universities, which are not in their hometowns. None of the American participants index their American identity through visual symbols in their blog posts.

Participants make relevant other aspects of their transportable identities in their blog posts. Several make reference to music as something they enjoy and communities related to music that they are members of, for instance Deni who sings in an a cappella group, Jack who plays electric bass in a metal band, Alef who spends time listening to metal rock music, and Brendan who sees live music when he is not doing school work.
A couple of participants index their religion in their responses to Question 4 about who they would invite for dinner: Thamena says she would invite the prophet Muhammad “because I long to see him personally” – though she does not explicitly say she is a Muslim, and Jack says he would invite Jesus; “I’m a Christian, and even though I think God is everywhere, Jesus went through a lot and was the Son of God”.

Mohammed and Thamena both make reference to their use of Internet as a hobby, indexing themselves as experienced Internet users. Interestingly, we see this to a certain degree reflected in their participation patterns in the online sessions – both are quite active – and in their text mode identities, particularly Thamena as we will see in the next section of this chapter.

### 6.3.3. Learners or users of English?

Several of the participants position themselves as English learners in their responses to the question asking why they decided to participate in the programme. They do not explicitly use the category of language learner, but Fadela, Thamena, Doha, and Maawa all used the verb ‘to improve’ their English/language/speaking/communication in response to the question. Positioning themselves as learners or not expert speakers of English indexes a deficit view of their English competence and reflects the pervading categorisation that characterises foreign language education (Davies, 2003; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Jenkins, 2007; Rampton, 1990).

Several of the participants, however, made relevant their identity as users of English. Alef, for instance, in response to Question 2, reported that he had founded an English club at his college where he regularly meets other students for Drama/Theater workshops, discussion, cinema, and in response to Question 3, he wrote “Ten years from now?! That’s hard to answer, but most probable I’m gonna be teaching English somewhere in my country or in the Arab world. Still I’d like to live and work in the US”. He thus positions himself as an active, competent, and enthusiastic user of English and familiar with informal language (use of gonna), with an interest in the US. Thamena, like Alef, also expresses a desire
to go to the US (or UK) to study abroad, though specifies she wants to return to Jordan on finishing her studies, in response to Question 3. Her positioning thus shifts, for as well as a learner needing to improve, she also positions herself as a language user, not making reference specifically to English but saying that in her free time she sometimes translates and that she wants to be a professional translator in the future. Mohammed wrote that his reason for participating was “to communicate with the western people and try to spread my culture and learn their culture”. He does not specifically mention the English language so he does not index ‘learner’ identity, but rather ‘English user’ identity, as it is through the mediation of English and the technology that he will be able to engage in this communication and achieve his aim.

6.3.4. Prospective identities

The blogs were where participants could invest in the ‘prospective identity’ that the Soliya Connect Program offers participants, for this is where they have the opportunity to engage with the broader Soliya Community as well as their own group members. Only three of the participants used their personal blog space to communicate after their initial introductory page: Alef, Fadela, and Mohammed. Alef’s post was published online during the first week of the project and together with a photograph he writes about his experience volunteering in refugee camps on the border with Libya, indexing his active engagement with sociopolitical issues. This is an experience he was eager to talk about in the first dialogue session, as he made several references to it. This blog post had several comments over the following weeks, a couple from fellow group members, others from members of the Soliya community. However he did not publish any further posts on the blog.

Fadela also published three blog posts, all of which reflect her Palestinian identity. The first is a poem by Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet. The second is a picture of herself wearing a graduation outfit (which was actually a response to a request from one of the facilitators in the third dialogue session to post a picture of her graduation after she had told the group that she would be graduating). In the photo, her Palestinian identity is marked with keffiyeh over
her shoulder. On the same day, she also made another post which relates to an issue she mentioned in the same dialogue session which is the ‘day of the land in Palestine’. She makes reference to the resistance of the Palestinian people: “Today is the day of the land. Palestinians celebrate this day as a rebirth of their insistence to get Palestine free”. There are several references to the situation of Palestine as a stolen land. She makes reference to the martyrs and prisoners in Israeli jails.

Only three participants posted blog entries after the initial, obligatory post, and none of these made more than two posts on the blog. The asynchronous mode of communication cannot, therefore, be considered a site of interaction or of identity development and negotiation other than at the outset of the project where it allowed them to position themselves – within the constraints of the programme designers who required them to answer those five questions. These questions index a clear agenda, that is to provide initial output for dialogic discussion on personal, social, and cultural aspects. However, it is in the synchronous dialogue sessions that identities emerge as participants position themselves in relation to others as they engage in interaction.

6.4. The meeting room: synchronous identities

The dialogue group ‘met’ in Soliya’s ‘main meeting room’ for weekly sessions lasting two hours for seven consecutive weeks\(^4\). This online meeting room was the situated context for the interactions, where technology mediated the participants’ access to one another and even managed to offer a glimpse into one another’s local physical surroundings through the small webcam picture (see Figure 6.2 below). This shared space becomes the situated context of interaction, a space in itself with an evolving culture and norms of behaviour of its own which are influenced by a multiplicity of factors: the ideals of its developers who in turn have been influenced by the broader, socio-political context; the technology and its ‘affordances’ for communication; the individual participants and what they

\(^4\) This round of the Soliya Connect Program lasted only seven weeks, while it is usually an eight week programme.
bring to the space which is influenced by aspects of what Blommaert (1991) would describe as their ‘ethnic habitus’; and aspects of their local contexts on a multiplicity of levels.

6.4.1. Affordances of the meeting room

Figure 6.2. The Soliya videoconferencing interface

This kind of online situated context has been defined as a glocal space, as the global and local intersect one another in a hybrid and simultaneous manner (Messina

5. Reproduced with kind permissions from © Soliya.
Dahlberg & Bagga-Gupta, 2014). And it is mainly here that the participants’ situated identities come into being, through their interactions and also across communication modes, as they make relevant different aspects of their own and others’ situated and also transportable identities. This becomes their shared space, where they co-construct their shared history and their emerging group identity develops through the mediation of technology and language.

What is characteristic of the space is first of all its simplicity and minimal distraction from the participants themselves. The way participants are arranged in a circle is intended to create a friendly, non-threatening environment that has affinities to the seating arrangement used for university seminars or ‘circle time’ in primary schools or therapy groups. In her diary study, Norton (2000/2013) also reports using a circular seating arrangement:

“We sat in a circle, the configuration of which changed each week [...]. Such a setting, I believe, not only reduced the power differentials between me as a teacher and them as students, but also reframed the women’s expectations of whose knowledge was considered more legitimate and valid” (p. 184).

This arrangement is more conducive to dialogue than the hierarchical structure of some virtual learning environments which are specifically designed for teacher-student interaction. In the Soliya platform, at the centre of the circle is the text-chat window to which everybody can contribute. At the bottom of the text chat window is the ‘talk’ button, which participants need to click on in order to take the floor in audio-video communication. When somebody has the floor, their video window is slightly enlarged, as Sami’s is at the bottom centre of the image above. It is not possible for more than one person to speak at a time, so when somebody has the floor they cannot be interrupted through the audio-video mode, though all participants can use the text chat when somebody is speaking. The floor can be requested by clicking on the ‘talk’ button while somebody is talking, and when participants do this, a small orange button appears on the top right of their window and when the speaker ends their turn, they automatically take the floor.
There is also the possibility for participants to engage in private text chat with one another by clicking on the speech bubble at the top right hand corner of the video window of each participant. This chat is invisible to all other participants and the facilitators too.

The design of the communication, with multiple modes available simultaneously, means that participants need to accomplish their functions both on interactional and also technological levels, and they negotiate the mode of communication as well as meanings and identities. Researchers have found that these different layers of operations can sometimes create ‘dislocations’ (Liddicoat, 2011); participants can orient towards different modalities and multiple conversations can be carried out at the same time.

Liddicoat (2011) underscores the importance of examining how participants orient to and engage with the technological layer of operations as they construct, understand, and enact their social interaction and, I would add, their multiple identities. How well the participants can manipulate the different interfaces can affect the interaction, as the literature on the ‘participation gap’ has shown (Jenkins et al., 2009 in Kern, 2014), and which Bali and Bossone (2010) also found in their study on the Soliya context.

The software has been designed in an attempt to address the inevitable imbalances in terms of connectivity when linking participants from across the globe and to create a system which allows for different bandwidths. Yet imbalances do remain, and as Bali and Bossone (2010) report in their study, technical difficulties can limit some students’ participation, so they may miss parts of or entire sessions. If they have problems with the microphones or headsets they may have to communicate through text rather than speech, thus perhaps limiting their involvement in discussions. As the researchers report, inevitably the students facing the most technical problems are those from universities with fewer resources, often in the Arab/Muslim region and, they sustain, this empowers the Western-region participants and the well-funded (often Westernised) Arab institutions over the others.
6.4.2. Visual identities

Telles (2009, 2014) has looked at how one’s webcam image is a discursive construction – built on the performativity process that draws on the repetition and iteration of codes and symbols, such as gestures, hairstyle, clothes, earrings, make up, and flags (Butler, 1990). All of these will help to produce the emergence of gender, race, national identification, sexual orientation, social class, and most importantly the subject. Clearly the quality and size of the image determines how visible some of these identity markers are, and though webcam technology has been improving, there can be issues such as bandwidth and processing limitations.

Furthermore, in the Soliya platform, the participant windows are quite small as up to 12 or 13 windows may have to be visible at one time and they must all ‘fit’ on one screen. The more participants there are, the smaller their images and also the chance that part of the window will be overlapping with other windows. The size of the computer screen one is using also determines the size of the image. In most cases, there is only the head and shoulders of the participants visible of the screen and a very limited amount of the background context.

Despite its limitations, the webcam image does, nonetheless, offer visual cues as regards elements of interactants’ ‘transportable identities’. The screenshot below (Figure 6.3) comes from the recording of the first session (faces have been pixelated to anonymise the participants). Visible identity markers present indicate religion, gender (as in the case of the hijab, indexing Muslim and female identity, long hair female identity), and can also index political allegiances/beliefs – for example solidarity with Palestinian resistance as in the case of the keffiyeh which one of the participants is wearing (though it could be interpreted as a fashion item).

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6. There are several other factors which can influence the quality of the images we see on the interface, and these include bandwidth, quality of the webcam, lighting (the amount of light and whether it is front or back lighting) and the position of the camera.
The ‘transportable identities’ which are indexed by these markers are available to participants (and the analyst) but this does not mean that they are necessarily made relevant by the interactants during the interactions. Indeed in this study, which adopted an emic approach, they were only considered in the interactional analysis when they were oriented to by the participants.

Figure 6.3. Positioning in relation to webcams

6.4.3. Gaze and positioning

As Kern (2015) points out, “real eye contact does not exist online” (p. 345) for if one wants to create the illusion of looking into one’s interlocutor’s eyes in videoconferencing they have to look directly at the webcam rather than their interlocutor. However, the use of a webcam can and often does create a sense of proximity and even intimacy (Telles, 2009). Kern (2015) points out that the closer a speaker is to the webcam the more involved they appear to be, and indeed in exploring the data I found that often when a participant is speaking they will move closer to the camera. Clarity of the image is an important issue.

7. Reproduced with kind permissions from © Soliya.
Some participants can be seen very clearly with facial expressions that can easily be interpreted, whilst others have a very pixelated image.

In Figure 6.3 above, all of the participants present are relatively close to their webcams, with Jessica furthest away. As regards gaze, we can see that some participants appear to be looking directly at their interactants as their webcams seem to be positioned slightly above the level of their eyes (possibly incorporated on top of the screens of the computers they are using). Others seem to be looking in a different direction, that is their gazes are not directed towards their webcams, though we assume they are looking at their computer screens.

The framing of the participants, that is their position in relation to their webcams can be determined by the participants to a greater or lesser extent. It is partly established by technical issues such as whether the webcam is fixed or moveable, but even with fixed webcams there is a degree of flexibility, and users can, and often do, exercise a degree of agency in how they position themselves in relation to the webcam (Sindoni, 2013). The inset window with one’s own face, the ‘contre-champ’ (Guichon & Cohen, 2016), offers a form of ‘visual mirroring’, as Malinowski and Kramsch (2014) define it, an “ever-present reflection of the self” (p. 20). This can have a distracting effect, as these authors found, or it can be seen to support identity construction, and the framing and positioning of oneself in the interactions (Telles, 2009).

The importance of framing for some of the participants in this situated context emerges as some of the participants purposefully placed the camera so that their

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8. In his study of the contribution of webcam images to teletandem sessions (which entail one to one student interaction through video-conferencing and a somewhat different situated context as there are only two interlocutors, hence attention is more focussed on the image which is also larger), Telles (2009) found that the majority of the 22 students that participated in his survey study reported that they took care to control the framing of their own image, how much of the background (their physical and ‘cultural’ space) was made visible and making technical adjustments to correct it if necessary. Telles (2009) also reports that most students found webcams to give them greater security and self-confidence in conversation though some students had unfavourable opinions about the use of webcam images as they found them intrusive “by exposing feelings, gestures and reactions that they preferred to hide from their partners” (p. 71). Research which has been carried out as regards the use of the webcam in pedagogical contexts has found framing to constitute a ‘crucial element’: what the online teacher chooses to show can personalise the relationship with the learner and has been found to facilitate comprehension and involvement (Guichon & Cohen, 2016). It can be assumed that the webcam has some impact on the interaction in the Soliya configuration, though the higher number of participants and therefore images and also reduced size may mitigate the effect.
heads appear only in the lower left hand corner of their window and at an angle. They appear to be deliberately removing themselves from the centre stage of their window, avoiding others’ gazes and the level of proximity and intimacy that the webconferencing can entail (Kern, 2014; Telles, 2009). It is interesting that these two participants also failed to publish a photo of themselves in the Soliya blogs, thus reflecting an alignment between their identities in these modes and a dispreference for the visual mode.

The webcam allows a small part of the participants’ local spaces to enter the shared online space as the background is partly visible in the small windows. In most cases there is little to see, but the local context is always somehow a part of the communication and can be oriented to by the participants in many ways.

In the first session, the facilitators set up an activity called ‘where in the world’ which invites participants to move their webcams around the room they are in to show the other participants where they are connecting from and they share a part of their local (transportable) identities. Jessica models this activity for the others in Turn 13 in the excerpt below (Table 6.2).

Table 6.2. Session 1, Turn 13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Audio</th>
<th>Text chat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>‘hh ok so emm while ( ) for the others (2s) to connect (…) &gt;to hook in with us&lt; there should be umm (2s) ‘hh three or four other people, em shall we just try doing a round and we can each introduce ourselves? and so (…) a little bit (2s) emm and and show a little bit of about our environment about our environment. I’m in my office as you can see, can you see ? oops hehh and outside it’s raining (…) it’s a really horrible day ok (..) Can you show us &gt;a little bit about where you are?&lt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As she speaks she moves the webcam around the room she is in and out of the window, commenting on the rain outside and showing that she is in her office, but she does not say what kind of office it is, in what town or country, or what job she does. Without formulating an explicit description of her identity or her
geopolitical location she has, however, disclosed a small amount of information about her transportable identity, that she is not a student, but rather somebody who works in an office, but it is not clear what kind of office this is, nor her role in this office.

By moving the webcams around the rooms they are connecting from and sharing information about their immediate environments, through the ‘hors-champ’ the participants make relevant different aspects of their identities. As the participants follow Jessica’s example, many of them implicitly orient to their identities as students, for Kate’s room is messy as she is preparing for a ‘school trip’ to Dubai, Deni is in a ‘dorm room’, and Fadela in a library, whilst Jack shows his family home as it is ‘spring break’. Through the mediation of the webcam, participants have a glimpse into each other’s immediate contexts, their local worlds.

The activity ‘where in the world’ highlights the boundaries between the different local, physical spaces which come together in a shared, virtual space, the situated context of Soliya. Through this activity, participants oriented to each others’ physical spaces and showed alignment and adequation to the transportable identities of students that they all had in common. Following Jessica’s example, participants oriented to the visual mode and their immediate physical environment which could be framed by their webcams. The local spaces participants caught a glimpse of through this activity are present throughout the interactions in the three sessions analysed, however blurred or distant they may be, through the background noises that can be heard as participants speak, and also by the way they may determine what participants say and even how they say it. Speaking from a shared dorm room with a roommate present, or from a computer in an Internet cafe in a country which is experiencing political upheaval is not the same as speaking from a private space, though of course the impact it had on the interactions cannot be determined.

The fact that Jack was connecting at 5 o’clock in the morning was made relevant several times in the interactions and through the visual mode. He would often rub his eyes and hair and “do being sleepy” which came to characterise Jack’s identity as “funny/sleepy Jack”. At the same time it could be seen to authenticate
Jack’s identity as a committed member of the group by highlighting his dedication to the project by getting up so early to participate (see the Table 6.3 below).

Table 6.3. Session 3, Turns 29-33

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Audio</th>
<th>Text chat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>so what time is it in in for you Jack? five in the morning?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>silence</td>
<td>(5s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>yeah five in the morning it’s been exciting (.) I’ve been talking to my friends about these sesssions and they’re like ‘hh oh my gosh that’s way too early I would ne:ver do that ‘hh so yeah that’s um interesting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>silence</td>
<td>(3s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>hh we:ll we appreciate your dedication and commitment yeah I don’t think I could do it at five o’clock in the morning eh ha ha I wouldn’t function he he</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Temporal and physical locations (TimeSpace) also become, as Messina Dahlberg and Bagga-Gupta (2015) point out, important referents through which students frame their positioning inside the online space but also at the boundary of different online and offline communities. The TimeSpace dimension of this space is what the participants have in common and comes to embody their shared history and their collective identity. Through the webcam this is enacted in part through the visual language they collectively acquire – for instance the ‘thumbs up’ gesture to index they can hear one another, the air quotes gesture when they are aware they are using a contentious term, and waving goodbye as they take leave of the space.

6.4.4. Oral identities

The voice is an important channel of non-verbal communication because it delivers paralinguistic cues such as tone of voice, intonation, pitch, and speech rate. These are important elements to which a great deal of attention is paid in some forms of social linguistic analysis such as conversation analysis. There are
conventions for representing qualities such as speed of delivery, hesitations, and false starts in transcripts – and I have adopted some of these in the transcription process at various points, so there are aspects of the speakers’ identities that emerge, though their impact on the reader is limited compared to the effect of hearing the audio on the listener.

Jack, for example, emerges as an insecure speaker whose speech is characterised by disfluencies such as hesitation and false starts. The extract below (Table 6.4), which comes after he has been asked by Thamena why he wrote that Israel was fortunate in response to a word associations activity, is just one of many examples of Jack’s speaker identity. He was an active speaker and took the floor many times, his turns were long but characterised by redundancy. However, he showed a preference for the audio mode to the text chat, as there were a few occasions when he was called upon to speak through text, and could have oriented to this mode, but preferred the audio.

Table 6.4. Session 3, Turn 240

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Audio</th>
<th>Text chat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 240  | Jack    | ok erm I fortunate because: I’m not exactly sure why: erm everybody’s hehh well everybody I mean (.) like the West has decided to support (1s) Israel so much and I mean cos I can see (.) that the relationships between Israel and Palestine and other places is not a good one so I’m not exactly sure why (2s) we’ve been supporting them so I said fortunate because (s) (.) it means kind of lucky for them I guess like (4s) yeah but Israel’s lucky and I don’t necessa I don’t think it’s fair I think yeah we need to do something to (4s) well er but the West should be more aware and it er willing to hel- to make a difference? I gue- make a positive difference like settle the (4s) not the er controversy er not controversy erm sol(ve) the dispute? I guess I mean cos I want it to stop yeah | Jessica: Jack - not exactly sure why  
Jessica: ‘the “West” has decided to support Israel so much  
Jessica: I can see the relationship with Palestine is not a good one  
Jessica: so in terms of that relationship  
Jessica: Israel is lucky - the more powerful |
Though Jack is a ‘native speaker’ of English, his turns are not always clear and coherent as he appears insecure of the terminology to use, he searches for words and makes a lot of false starts and repairs. This may be due to his lack of familiarity with content and fear of upsetting or offending his interlocutors (as he reported in the final session).

Whilst hesitation and false starts can be included in transcriptions without too much difficulty, accent is difficult, if not impossible at times, to convey through transcription, hence that Brendan speaks with a North Carolina accent, or that Jessica speaks with a British accent and Thamena with a Jordanian one does not emerge from the transcript. One might ask whether accent is important for identity construction in the online space, and I would argue that it is, for accent can index aspects related to transportable identities relating to people’s origins or life trajectories (in terms of region, social class…) and may influence how participants orient to one another.

However, as I have said previously, aspects of identity become relevant in this study only if and when interactants orient to them explicitly or implicitly. For example, if a participant asks to be corrected or asks another how something should be pronounced, they are orienting to the other’s expert speaker identity (Liddicoat & Tudini, 2013) and making relevant their non-expert identity.

6.4.5. Constraints

For the participants, interacting through the audio mode was not straightforward since it is quite unlike face to face communication where one simply speaks. They had to click on the ‘Talk’ button and remember to click on it again once they had finished talking. Furthermore, in order to take the floor, that is to be heard, they had to wait for the floor to be free as it is not technically possible for participants to interrupt.

Furthermore, there were often issues linked to the quality of the audio, which can hinder understanding. The quality of audio is determined to a large degree by the quality of the Internet infrastructure (bandwidth capacity) which, in
turn, is influenced by geopolitical factors. North America and Europe are high bandwidth regions and have the top shares of global bandwidth. The Middle East’s bandwidth is very low in comparison, though it is growing. Palestinian telecommunications are under the control of Israel as it is Israel that allocates frequencies, determines where infrastructure can be built and allocates bandwidth for internet use. Capping bandwidth, slowing down traffic and even suspending Internet access are measures which (as well as limited infrastructure) affect the Internet’s functionality and thus can limit free expression – and this is something which repressive governments often do. If we consider in particular the power attributed to social networks in the so-called Arab Spring it would not be surprising to learn that such measures were taken in Egypt and Tunisia. Whether or not this was indeed the cause, the quality of audio for Fadela (in Palestine), Ranà, and Mohammed (in Egypt) was particularly poor with fuzziness and interference making them at times incomprehensible, and they regularly disappeared from the meeting room due to connectivity problems. Alef’s audio was not of bad quality though he was connecting from Tunisia, and Kate who was connecting from Qatar had a generally good connection. The quality of the audio of the students connecting from the US was generally excellent, there was no background noise or interference. Jessica was connecting from Italy, and the quality of the audio was generally acceptable. The negative impact technological issues can have on students’ participation and engagement in the Soliya Connect Program has been reported by (2013, 2014).

6.4.6. Written/text identities

I now explore how participants and facilitators oriented to the text chat in their identity construction. By coding and quantifying the main discourse functions for which facilitators and participants used the text chat I conceptualised the discourse identities created through this mode, which also served to acquire a better understanding of the situated identities of facilitators and participants.

Throughout the sessions we see the facilitators orienting to the identity of transcribers as one of them transcribes a summary of what is being said while the other leads the dialogue. In the example below (Table 6.5), we see transcription ‘in action’, as Jessica types what Ranà is saying. In the second line of text, in Turn 161 where she is transcribing, she indexes orientation to this identity by writing Ranà’s name followed by a dash, and then we can see in the following lines she is still transcribing, though she doesn’t write Ranà’s name on every line. She closes her transcription of Ranà in Turn 162 with a ‘smiling face’ emoticon, a way of showing her alignment with Ranà’s words using the affordances of the text chat.

Table 6.5. Session 1, Turns 161-164

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Spoken</th>
<th>Text chat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>161</td>
<td>Ranà</td>
<td>(2s) well guys I just want to tell you that we have another person who is supposed to be communicating with us but they are taking some technical problems ( ) in their internet lab and they will try and be there shortly? I just want to tell you some more about our role (...) as facilitators, me and Jessica? we are here just to support you to give you the quick directions you are totally free to speak about er whatever topic you want? you are totally free to express your opinion ? we are here just to support and organising</td>
<td>10:22 Jessica: Great Mohammed 10:40 Jessica: Ranà - a little more about our role 10:45 Jessica: We are here to support you 10:48 Jessica: give the group directons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>162</td>
<td>silence</td>
<td>(34s)</td>
<td>10:56 Jessica: you’re totally free to express your opinoins 10:59 Jessica: ask what you want 11:12 Jessica: we’re here to help you along 11:15 Jessica: and organize sometimes :-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>163</td>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>OK and Kate?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are several ways in which the facilitator-transcriber indexes that she is transcribing others’ words. The most common way is described above, with the name of the speaker followed by a colon and then the transcription following through a series of lines without the name being repeated every time.

The transcriber is in a sense acting as ‘interpreter’ of the events for others, as what she writes is necessarily selective. It is important that the transcriber understands what is being said in order to provide a written record of interaction, hence checking comprehension and requesting repetition are activities which display an orientation to the identity of transcriber and facilitator of understanding for the others. In the extract above, for example, we see in Turn 164 Jessica uses the text chat to check her understanding (“is studying theology – right?”), and Kate corrects her (“sociology”).

Understanding is an interactional achievement and is closely related to issues of face (Hamilton, 1994; Heritage, 1988, in Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998, p. 177). Failure to understand and repeatedly requesting repetition can be face-threatening and could suggest that the interactants’ English language competence is not adequate, thus making relevant their ‘learner’ or ‘non-native speaker’ status. In many international or lingua franca settings there is often an orientation not to topicalise others’ language production and instead to engage in practices such
as ‘let it pass’ and ‘make it normal’ (Firth, 1996), which are used to deflect attention from linguistic hurdles. These strategies are occasionally used by the facilitators when their task of facilitating understanding through transcription is not jeopardised. However, there are many occasions when the facilitators are transcribing and need to check understanding of what is being said. Often they apologise and account for their lack of comprehension, attributing it to poor quality audio, as in the example below. This accounting for their request serves to protect both their face and that of their interlocutors.

Jessica: Doja - focussed on her opinion
Jessica: the revolution, and the hope of the people
Jessica: is that right? Sound not great

Sometimes the facilitators also account for their comprehension checks or difficulties in transcription by assigning it to the speed of delivery, thus indexing participants’ failure to adequately their speech to the international context, a characteristic that has been ascribed to the ‘monolingual native speaker’ (Jenkins, 2014). This use of the text chat allows the facilitators to highlight the need for the speaker to adapt their speech to the context, in a non-threatening way.

Jessica: middle name is Adam
Jessica: relating to man, right?
Jessica: You were speaking too fast for me to type!
Jack: Yes

There are several instances in the text chat transcripts where some of the participants explicitly index the facilitator-transcriber identity and the use of chat in supporting their understanding. For example, they may specifically ask for transcription, as in the example below.

Mohammed: sorry can u write it down
Ranà: well no worries mouhammad
Mohammed: ok thanks
Fadela: write plz
6.5. Group identity

Through the qualitative analysis of the text chat it was possible to see how as the participants get to know one another better and as the sessions progress, more of them use this medium of text to engage in phatic communication. We can see this from the salutations at the end of the first session when Alef, who is the first to take his leave, sets an example, with a friendly, informal tone and emoticon. Others respond to Alef, many aligning to the same friendly tone, and adequating to his expressive use of chat with emoticons and abbreviations, in particular Thamena and Fadela.

Alef: I gotta go :) see u guys
Jessica: great - although it ws the first meetin
Jessica: it wasn’t that difficult
Thamena: nice to meet u all :)
Thamena: bye Alaf :)
Jack: By e Alaf!
Alef: salutations from Tunisia with love ;)
Mohammed: bye Alaf
Maawaa: bye gues thank you all
Denise: I also have to go! bye, thank you!
Thamena: ok see you all then
Thamena: tc
Thamena: :)
Jessica: nice to meet you all
Thamena: bye
Jessica: and am really looking forward to seeing you again next week
Mohammed: thanx every one again and bye
Fadela: c u alll byeeeee
Jack: I will see you all next week! byenext

This phatic use of the text chat, for greetings and leave-taking, offering encouragement to one another and expressing feelings through emoticons indexes the emergence of a group identity. As the sessions progress this seems to
be increasingly marked and gradually involves more and more of the participants who align to this use of text and participants’ use of text chat as the following extract from the beginning of Session 7 shows.

Kate: hello miss Jessica
Mohammed: hi
Jessica: Hi Mohammed
Kate: hi
Ranà: hey there
Mohammed: hi Ranà
Kate: hi
Ranà: Jack
Ranà: good morning
Kate: nice hair cut :) 
Ranà: yeah
Mohammed: hi Jack
Jessica: Hi Fadela
Jack: hey Mohammed :) 
Fadela: hiiiiiiiiiiii
Kate: hi
Fadela: nice Jack :P
Mohammed: hi
Jack: hey
Jessica: Kate - you have the mike - why don’t you ask a question
Ranà: hi maawa
Fadela: mmmmmmm
Fadela: forgot :|
Fadela: preparing for the finals!!
Kate: when is it?
Jessica: Hi Thamena abd Maawa
Ranà: hi Thamena
Ranà: hey Dojaq
Doja: hi everybody
Kate: good luck!
Thamena: hii all :)  
Fadela: thx :)  
Jessica: try your mike Thamena and Doja and Maawa  
Fadela: hiii thmeeeeeeennaa  
Thamena: hiiiiiii fadeee  
Thamena: u r talking about finals :S

We see Fadela and Thamena using repeated letters, abbreviations (thx) and emoticons as they interact with others, and in particular with one another, perhaps affirming their identity as friends through this playful language (Kern, 2015, p. 109).

In the opening of the session even Kate and Jack, who until now had rarely used these phatic forms of text communication, use smileys, indexing group alignment through these discursive resources.

Other forms of phatic communication, largely through the text chat and which index the emergence of group identity are thanking, particularly used by the facilitators as follow-ups to responses and also the word ‘great’ or expressions like “that’s great” (in bold below) which index a friendly supportive group identity.

Jessica: sees it as a great opportunity  
Jessica: what are you hoping to gain from it  
Jessica: Jack - see other people’s viewpoints  
Jessica: Jack: more personal insight  
**Jessica: that’s great! Thanks**  
Jessica: What do you expect to gain from Soliya?  
Jessica: Alef_ same as Jack  
Jessica: heard from classmate  
Jessica: excited about this opportunity to talk about issues that all humans share  
Jessica: like religion, politics,  
Jessica: exciting to meet others from other parts of the world
Jessica: and what they think of me, my country and people
Jessica: Thanks Alef

In the analysis above I have identified affective indicators such as emotion and humour, interactive features such as greetings and salutations, vocatives, and cohesive indicators such as acknowledgement, approval, and invitation to participate (orchestration). All of these uses of text chat are markers of social presence or community indicators and can be seen to index participants’ orientation to an online group identity (Kehrwald, 2010, p. 47).