How does online experience inform our sense of self?  
NSFW blogger identity narratives

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Introduction

‘Nowadays, one of the most exciting social, as well as romantic, sites to visit is cyberspace,’ Ben-Ze’ev (2004) writes in his book ‘Love Online’. Based on in-depth interviews with witty, creative professionals (and not at all the furry-palmed and beady-eyed sex addicts stereotypically depicted as internet porn and erotica producers/prosumers (Bruns 2006)), who emerged from behind NSFW28 blogs, this chapter will illustrate the participants’ narrative identities and their formation. I will outline how the bloggers’ identity work constructs them as different from others, as responsible (or not) agents, and which events are constructed as formative or transformative in past time and space. This chapter will contribute to understanding internet as a social space for identity work and social reality construction, and belonging to online communities as a lifestyle choice.

Many of the former socialist countries are doing extremely well in terms of internet penetration, and the general population’s internet agility. According to the data from Statistics Estonia, 90% of all Estonian households with children had a broadband connection in the first quarter of 2012. Estonia is also the first in the world in terms of digital freedom according to Freedom House’s ‘Freedom on the Net 2012’ report. Banking, tax paying and voting have moved online (71% of users in Estonia had completed tax returns online and 62% gotten digital prescriptions, 2012, Statistics Estonia) and various online cultures and communities play an important role in people’s everyday life. The bloggers included in this chapter are not from former socialist countries, but there is every reason to assume that internet-savvy people in transforming societies use online spaces for self-, and sexual-exploration and community related practices as much as anyone else. In the globalising, internet-connected world, struggling with the continuing occurrence of moral panics, it is important to understand how and whether ‘virtual’ online experiences inform our identities. This would mean that an aspect of our lives often considered playful (online communication, flirting, cybering29) could inform our choices in areas commonly considered serious (career, family values, monetary decisions, child-rearing or sexuality).

28 Not suitable for work – NSFW.
29 To cyber – to have cybersex.
Individuals are not fixed, but constantly constituted, and reconstituted, through the discursive practices they have access to in their daily lives (Davies 2003). With the line between being online and offline blurring (Orgad 2009), and the increasing popularity of SNS’s, we can be fairly certain, that at least some of those discursive practices are accessed online. tumblr, the SNS where the participants of this research have their blogs, is a microblogging environment launched in 2007. The platform is easy to use and incorporates social networking functions much more than previous blogging environments did. A user can post text, photos, video and audio files, links and quotes, but in addition, there is an opportunity to build a community by following other users and monitoring who follows you. From a researcher’s point of view, blogs have some benefits over SNS’s with less text (Facebook etc.), as they allow us, via the unabbreviated textual content, a clearer access to narratives of self.

There is a lot of sex-talk in NSFW content, and sex is commonly still hidden in our societies. Online, however, it can be explored without fear (or with lesser fear) of social repercussions (see Ross 2005; Daneback 2006). Deaux’ (1993) social identity model suggests that members of stigmatised-identity internet-groups are more likely to incorporate their virtual-group membership into their self-concepts because it is important to them (cited in Bargh and McKenna 2004) and because of a lack of an offline equivalent for the group (Bargh and McKenna 2004). An online group built around discussions unavailable elsewhere (e.g. who talks about sex), is, therefore, a good place to start looking for what online participation does to our self-identity. Based on her analysis of an online soap-opera fan-forum, Baym (2000) emphasises that people in online communities define themselves not just in relation to their offline selves, and the medium, but also in relation to one another, and the group as a whole. Hence, instead of just looking at a person and the ‘secret’ content they produce online, we need to look at whom these secrets are shared with.

Theoretical Context

Identity and Communicative Context


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30 Social networking site – SNS.
31 75 000 bloggers switched to it immediately after the launch and by now there are approximately 50 million blogs and 20 billion posts on Tumblr. (March 2012). The environment allows communication via exchange of public or private messages, commenting on other people’s content, submitting content to other bloggers, liking other blogger’s content and reblogging it, with or without added captions.
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(late/liquid) modern societies. We all make daily identity-based choices about our looks, habits, health, values, etc. In this chapter, I am adopting the constructivist and practical-hermeneutic approach to identity, viewing it as a reflexive project (Giddens 2010 [1991]), a saturated self or a ‘pastiche personality’ /.../ constantly borrowing bits and pieces /.../ from whatever sources are available’ (Gergen 2000 [1991]: 150). It is patched together ‘from the overwhelming expanses of mediated messages in our environments’ (Baym and Markham 2009: x), or as Aberton (2010) puts it, demonstrates the characteristics of an assemblage in which the elements are not fixed, nor do they belong to a larger pre-given list, but are constructed, as they are entangled together. Identity has become a ‘product of reflexively inscribed lifestyle projects that draw upon physical and symbolic resources of the media and cultural industries’ (Allaste and Bennet, this book), yet that lifestyle too, is a product of choice, and can be either a form of social integration, or disintegration (Giddens [2010] 1991).

Social interactions raise the ‘who am I?’ question, and according to Alvesson et al. (2008) the attempt to answer it prompts identity work32 – the mental activity an individual undertakes to construct and understand their self as coherent, distinct and positively valued. People craft their identities through interaction, in concert with others and out of the diverse contextual resources within their reach. According to Knights and Willmott (1989) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) self-narrative is created by drawing on cultural resources as well as memories and desires to reproduce or transform one’s sense of self (cited in Alvesson et al. 2008). Mallan and Giardina (2009) offer the concept of wiki to understand the identity constructed and narrated online. They use the term wikidentity to describe the identity work in SNSs, and argue that wiki-like behaviour has consequences for re-conceptualising identity, as something that is mediated by (rather than at odds with) technology. ‘…this ‘wikidentity’ becomes a particular, collaborative process that changes according to purpose, context, and form.’ (Mallan and Giardina 2009)

Exploring identity online warrants including the concepts of self-presentation or impression management (Goffman 1959; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Trammell 2005). While some studies support the claim that online constructions of the self are idealised and do not reflect actual personalities (Manago et al. 2008), there are others that show the opposite. Vazire and Gosling (2004) used Festinger’s Social Comparison Model to explore, among other things, impression management on personal websites. They found that identity claims there convey substantial amounts of information about their authors (high

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levels of inter-observer consensus were noted and people were generally accurate in their assessments of website authors’ personalities. Haferkamp and Krämer (2011) also conducted interviews and experiments that indicated the social comparison model at work in social media. Back et al. (2010) (relying on works of Ambady and Skowronsiki 2008; Funder 1999; Hall and Bernieri 2001; Kenny 1994) claim that self-presentation online integrates various kinds of personal information – private thoughts, facial images, and social behaviour, all of which contain valid information about personality.

Thus, trying to untangle what online experience does to identity and lifestyle construction, means following the people to the spaces where the reflexive choices are made; where identity work and impression management may happen.

**Self- and Sexual Identity in Online Communities**

One’s identity creation involves others, both directly and indirectly (via the co-constructed social reality). Online relationships are highly similar to those developed in person, in terms of their breadth, depth, quality and longevity (Bargh and McKenna 2004). People whose initial meeting takes place online like each other more than those who first meet face to face (McKenna, Green and Gleason, 2002), and it is easier for people to show their ‘real self’ online (Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons 2002). Joinson (2008) lists self-enhancement; finding meaning in your life; increased self-knowledge from social comparison; pleasure (from mental stimulation); heightened self-esteem from praise; and social support among the main motivators for internet use. Belonging to an online group is, hence, pleasurable in many ways. Pleasure inspires individuals to accept group messages and incorporate group meanings and attitudes into their own constructions of reality (Fulk 1993). In addition to the pleasure received from being online and interacting with other people, in case of an online experience that incorporates the sexual, there are additional hedonistic practices and therapeutic discourses (Attwood 2010) involved.

What about identity construction in specific subsections of social media? Pluemavarn and Panteli (2007) showed that social identity created in blogging communities has an effect on members, as well as on the community in general. Blogging offers people a unique opportunity to work on their self-identity via self-expression and social interaction (McCullagh 2008), and blogs serve as a form of self-therapy (Tan 2008). One could look at blogosphere as a figured world – ‘a socially produced, culturally constituted activity’ (Holland et al. 1998: 40-41) where people produce and perform new self-identities. Muise’s (2011) research on women’s sex blogs shows that they can be seen as a ‘safe space’ for discussion of (active and embodied) desire, and Wood (2008) intro-
duces the notion of commons, when describing how women’s sex blogs help develop vocabularies of desire, reduce shame, build community, and enable women to continue the process of regaining control over information about sexuality. This chapter is based on interviews with male, female, and transgender ‘sex-bloggers’, but the notions of safe space and commons are useful beyond just the gendered experience of blogging. Blogs allow for collecting substantial amounts of ‘relatively un-self-conscious’ naturalistic data (Hookway 2008), and it is my working assumption that a sex blog allows people to type themselves into being in a more open and layered way than, perhaps, some other form of non-sexualised social media participation.

SNSs and online communities are places where one can present and construct a self or ‘type oneself into being’ (Sundén 2003: 3) a phenomenon well-researched (boyd 2007, boyd and Heer 2006; Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield 2006; Siibak 2011). Ross (2005) has applied this thinking specifically to sexuality on internet, and called it ‘typing, doing and being’ sexual. The internet has been a cosy home for sex-related and pornographic content from the get-go, but as Attwood (2010: 7) writes: ‘in porn’s transition from material to online spaces, /…/ its consumption becomes part of a multitasking mode as users move between ‘socialising, buying commodities and searching information /…/ chatting, peeping, cruising, masturbating and maintaining friendships’ (Jacobs 2004: 73)’. The use of the internet for online sexual activities has been researched since the beginning of the 2000s, including work on searching for sexual partners, cybersex; issues of addiction, gender variances, etc. (see Griffiths 2001; Leiblum 2001; Binik 2001; Ferree 2003; Cooper et al. 2003, Daneback, Cooper and Mansson 2005; Daneback 2006; Ross et al. 2007; Daneback, Mansson and Ross, 2007; Albright 2008; Whitty 2008; Döring 2009; Attwood 2010; Sevickova and Daneback 2011; Brand et al. 2011). It is important to point out that this chapter’s focus is not explicitly on sexuality and sexual identity, but on participants’ narrative identity in a wider sense. Sex-related online experience just might, as illustrated in the literature cited here, provide a clearer view of it.

**Methods and Data**

lating the range of different and possibly conflicting roles and relationships; and in diachronically – that is, in time) (cited in Smith and Sparkes 2008). Introducing the concepts of synchronic and diachronic into the discussion of narrative identity, swiftly takes us to Bamberg’s (2010) approach, which utilises both, and is the methodical beacon for this work.

Bamberg (2010) outlines three practical challenges that the self is facing. He explicates these in terms of dilemmatic spaces within which identity activities, and narrating, are navigated. These are: (a) successful diachronic navigation between constancy and change, (b) the establishment of a synchronic connection between sameness and difference (self and others), and (c) the management of agency between the double-arrow of a person-to-world versus a world-to-person fit (internal/ psychological agency versus external/ social agency). Explained in simpler terms, it means that the narrative analysis of interview data shows how the blogger accounts for how he or she has emerged over time as different from (but the same as) others, and simultaneously as someone who considers oneself to be a responsible agent (or not).

**Interview data** was gathered via in-depth interviews, conducted with the NSFW bloggers in November and December of 2011, via Skype video, voice and, in some cases, typed chat. 12 interviews were included in this analysis, among those, 5 bloggers were female, one transgender and 6 male. Their ages ranged from 26 – 60, with most participants being in their mid to late 30s. Most of the participants had a university degree or equivalent, with some college students, one PhD, and a couple of graduate degrees. More detailed information on participants’ background can be accessed in Table 1 in the Appendix.

Because of the sensitivity of the blog content and the interview questions, and to increase comfort and rapport, participants were given a choice of the medium. Typed-chat interviews took on average an hour longer (3 hours versus 2 hours), but produced more or less the same amount of data. No significant differences in terms of disclosure, thoroughness of account, etc. were found in audio, audio-video and text-based interviews. The fact that the interviewees and the interviewer either had a previously existing online relationship or had estab-

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33 24 interviews in total were conducted, 12 of them were selected to be analysed for this chapter, following the same typical case / maximum variation principles.

34 An asynchronous email interview of 5 preliminary questions was conducted about 3 days prior to the scheduled synchronic interview. An interview plan consisting of 18 umbrella-questions and approximately 7-10 probes per each was prepared in advance. The questions focused on the participant’s descriptions of their blogs and their blog content, their blogging experience, the level and intensity of interactions, relationships, emotional investments, types of OSA (online sexual activities) they participated in, their views on tumblr as a community, their offline context and their own interpretations of why they do it.
lished contact in the NSFW tumblrverse, (hence a mutual understanding of the cultural context in a text-based community), probably reduced the potential brittleness of the typed interviews.

  The sampling strategy combined Weiss’ (1994) rather ambitious claims of representability of the maximum rage with Cresswell’s (1998) maximum variation and typical case strategies. Practically speaking, the snowball mechanism of identifying cases of interest from people who know people and who know what cases are information-rich (Cresswell, 1998) was used\(^{35}\).

### Results and discussion – Bloggers identity formation and sense of self

The results and discussion will be presented in three narratives. First, the speakers' sense of self in terms of how it is seen as different, yet similar to others; second, in terms of whether it is seen as externally influenced or internally driven; and finally the speaker’s identity formation through time and space. Concepts of identity work (Alvesson et al. 2008), impression management (Goffman 1959), online social comparison (Haferkamp and Krämer 2011, Vazire and Gosling 2004, Baym 2000), online self-presentation (Back et al. 2010), relationship development online (Bargh and McKenna 2004, McKenna, Green and Gleason 2002, Barg, McKenna and Fitzsimons 2002) the role of pleasure in integrating group values (Fulk 1993); and, in general, the reflexivity of the identity project (Giddens [2010] 1991) are used to contextualise the narratives of identity construction.

There will be multiple contradictions in each narrative: these stem less from the differences between the speakers and more from the inherent contradictions in each participant’s story. Bamberg encourages researchers to scrutinise the inconsistencies and contradictions as they mark the teller’s ‘constant navigation and finessing between different versions of selfhood’ (2010: 14).

**I am similar yet different – first dilemmatic space of selfhood**

Participants integrated and differentiated their sense of self through varying versions of ‘we’ in their stories. The We-s ranged from the participant and their significant other, to the often mentioned We of ‘me and my tumblr.-friends’.  

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\(^{35}\) The sampling criteria meant authors of NSFW blogs in English, that have been active for at least 6 months, which are updated on average at least 3 times per week, where captions are added to pictures, videos and audios, and / or which also post merely textual posts, whose ‘Ask’ boxes are activated, who are legal adults and who give their informed consent to participate in the study. Five bloggers whom the author knew to have a blog that met the criteria, who were popular and had a high status in the community were approached and asked for further contacts.
The ‘me and my partner’-We was often constructed in comparison to other couples, seamlessly traversing the contradictions from statement to statement – showing themselves as similar to other couples in one sense (e.g. difficulties in living the monogamous norm) and as different in another (e.g. sexual lifestyles). This is a layered strategy of social comparison that was common for various categories of sameness/difference in this first dilemmatic space. First, one differentiates from some others and integrates with other others, and then, the same is repeated for the constructed We-entity.

The various tumblr.-We-s usually varied by levels of inclusion. The bloggers navigated their selfhood in the context of people they trust, versus others they are merely comfortable with; the others they engage in OSA with, versus the bigger ‘we’ that engulfs all sexy bloggers on tumblr. People construct themselves in relation to each other and the group (Baym 2000), thus these different We-s of inclusion are an important aspect for the person’s sense of self. Also, systematically differentiating one’s tumblr.-We from one’s offline-We can be seen as an indication that the online group is important enough and there isn’t an offline equivalent to it, thus the online group’s values are likely to be incorporated into one’s sense of self.

Georgina (41): But um... when it comes to my tumblr. friends, I feel that there’s nothing off limits, there’s nothing I can’t put out there, there isn’t anything they will be shocked by or disgusted by, or wonder why I said it.

A wider, gendered-We was also evident. Wood (2008) and Muise (2008) have written about the importance of sex-blogging for women in particular, blogs being a ‘safe place’ and a way to regain control over sexual information. In this case, participants differentiated the genders (men from women) by associating with one’s own gender-We or emphasising issues that concerned the other gender but not one’s own (for example ‘slut-shaming’ for women). Those narratives, however, co-existed with differentiations from one’s own gender group (common for both men and women), e.g. speaking of one’s sexual appetite falling outside the norm for one’s own gender and age group (or being constructed as abnormal by their partner), etc. Additionally, the ‘safe place’ thread was not limited to women’s experiences, but enveloped those of unorthodox sexual lifestyles and preferences (kinky, poly) and the transgender participant.

In addition to the various We-s that the participants’ constructed themselves as a part of, there were also the Me-constructions – identity claims that pertained to just their sense of self alone and its social comparison to others.

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36 OSA – online sexual activities.
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**Carl** (60): I was pleased to see not everyone was a randy porn addict /…/ and some were, like me, looking for a discreet forum to freely show some more intimate sides of themselves.

Topics of age, (emotional) maturity, personal ethics and morals, blogging habits, *etc.* were integrated into the Me-narrative. Being able to gain more self-knowledge via the social comparison and the blogging experience was often recognised and reflected on.

Another important category of difference was that of separating some others from other *others*. Hierarchies and typologies of others that make them more and less similar to, or more and less important to, one’s sense of self were evoked in identity construction. There are ‘the hello people’, and the ‘share your day with people’, as Brian (mid-30s) put it. This othering practice can be seen as a form of identity work, or, using the wikidentity concept, it can be said that a participant is many things to, and with, many people; changing according to purpose, context and form. Differentiations between others were also made according to their tumblr. status, or personal ‘consumer’ preferences – other bloggers were seen as more and less suitable for particular interactions (*e.g.* this single person is not suitable for OSA, as they will probably get attached) and were categorised by the level of insight, or the quality of content they offer, or by how genuine they seem. Authenticity or seeming/being genuine was curiously a common category of social comparison, and often pertained to blog content (as a consumable good), rather than just the blogger (as a potential interaction partner).

**Lisa** (26): Some blogs provide more than others, the ones who give you a true glimpse of the person’s personality become most popular.

There was also a negative category of others – the *dangerous others*, those, who are either not on tumblr. or not a part of the community, for example, people who read sexy tumblr. blogs, but do not have a sexy blog themselves, or people who comment anonymously.

**Eric** (late 20s): When someone else in the community ruins their anonymity, or even when someone you know in your real life comes to read your blog and leaves you a comment, calling you out by your real name, that is enough for a lot of the people to just call it quits and end the whole thing.

The relationship between the wider group of neutral outsiders (not-Us) and the specific group of dangerous others was a curious one. At times the bulk of not-Us was constructed as dangerous, while elsewhere the importance of dangerous others was underplayed. It functioned almost as a shadow for the narrative of
belonging. When the Me was sharply delineated, the community, and the We, was construed as less important, and the other others as less dangerous. But when one of the tumblr.-We-s was focused on (for example when discussing the limitations of one’s offline group of friends and acquaintances) those who were not ‘with us’ were constructed as ‘against us’.

Participants’ sense of self was differentiated from others also in terms of the **content of their blog**. The amount of pictures of the individual, reblogs, captions, the level of interaction, these are all important aspects of identity work and social comparison via content. Bloggers also emphasised issues such as the blog having (or not having) a theme (e.g. black and white erotica, superhero erotica, food and sex) or a specific voice (e.g. personal blog type blogs where the theme is the personality of the blogger). If the theme, or the voice, was strong enough it could warrant a set up of a separate blog for things that didn’t fit, so as not to pollute that voice. In the following example Theresa’s first blog was dedicated to her overseas lover and she wanted to keep it clean, as that and only that, revoking her own right to post whatever she liked on her blog.

**Theresa** (37): There was so much good stuff coming across my dash that I'd never use on Blog-Theresa that I set up Blog-Theresa-2, it seemed easy and fun...like tearing clippings out of a magazine and putting them up on a cork board at my desk.

Adding or not adding original captions to the pictures posted was another area of content-based differentiation often mentioned, but posting (sexy) pictures of one’s self, and the quantity and quality of those pictures, was one of the most important categories of integration/ differentiation as the bloggers constructed their sense of self.

**Peter** (37): There are some people, who just post themselves indiscriminately; I want to be a little more artistic.

Some content on tumblr., although arousing, was considered politically or philosophically unacceptable, bringing us to Wood’s (2008) claim that sex-blogging allows one to reclaim control over sexual information:

**Olly** (28): There are blogs I avoid because I find them misogynistic or queer-phobic, even if they are otherwise hot.

Finally, the **blog’s function for its owner** – it most often served as a diary or a place for (creative) self-expression – was an important aspect of differentiation. The dichotomy and simultaneity of therapeutic and creative impulses can be conceptualised in the light of what Attwood (2010) wrote about online porn’s function for users in general – adding therapeutic discourses to the obvious masturbatory ones.
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I am (not) responsible for how this pans out – second dilemmatic space

Lack of agency or external agency, as Bamberg (2010) uses it, was incorporated into people’s sense of self via societal norms and pressures, which were especially prominent in descriptions of women (both by men and women). Inhibitions and social repercussions against women, who prosume/produse sexual content online, and wish to engage in certain activities or lifestyles were often mentioned. (Notice the meeting of the first dilemmatic space [integration and differentiation of a gendered We] and the second dilemmatic space of agency in the following example).

Daniel (41): …there is so much judgment of women who expose themselves, so much judgment on women who do things, or talk about things they do, where there isn’t that for men. And I know a number of women who have gotten exceptionally frustrated and depressed, by the way they’re treated, but I don’t know any guys who have that.

A woman running a sex-blog acts at an intersection of external and internal agency, looking for a commons (Wood 2008), or a safe place (Muise 2008), a figured world (Holland et al. 1998) to type herself into being as a sexual creature (Ross 2005). An intricate system incorporating social pressures offline, those same pressures mirrored online and a safe space of the pornblr37 community can be witnessed here. This second narrative illustrates, among other things, the complex decisions made about self-expression and self-disclosure in the experience of sex-blogging. The sense of community, and feedback from other bloggers, seemed to have a dual effect on participants’ agency. The positive effects of being heard, belonging, feeling confident; the therapeutic role of interactions with like-minded peers…

Olly (28): Online, finding people with similar preferences, norms, and expectations can create communities that allow for the mutual celebration, validation, affirmation, and comparatively safe modes of showing ourselves off a bit.

…were co-presented with the negative effects of feeling pressure to deliver certain quality and content, especially after having gained a certain status on tumblr.

Katie (30): Like at times when I didn’t want to journal and ‘ruin’ the fairy-tale of non-stop hot sex, I was encouraged by the fact that a) it was so cathartic for me to write about these realities and b) I wanted to be real for those who were reading.

37 Pornblr – the common jargon for NSFW tumblrverse (combining porn and tumblr.).
Linking this with the findings presented in the previous section – the wider outsiders and the dangerous-others are constructed as the mouthpiece of the restrictive social norms, while the intergroup-others, and the various We’s, can be the source of the external pressure that seeps into the bloggers internal pressure to produce a certain amount of content, perform a certain type of identity. There was a layered strategy of social comparison at work in the first dilemmatic space, and there is a layered strategy of incorporating different levels of external agency into one’s sense of self at work here. 

**Self-censoring** is a good example of where external and internal pressures are so intertwined that it is difficult to separate them. A decision to post something (e.g. a self picture) is clearly internal, but worrying what others may think, causes self-censorship, and indicates a direct link with external agency. Using a concept of Holland *et al.* (1998) we can view this as self-formation – people are subjects of culturally constructed social worlds, yet at the same time agents capable of remarkable improvisation. Self-censorship was activated when speaking about having special, more intimate relationships with some tumblrites than others, and needing to, *e.g.*, spare them, or hide aspects of one’s experience from them. This supports the research that found online and offline relationships highly alike – online self-censorship works similarly to censoring one’s actions from an offline significant other (editing the blog content if they have access to it, or editing the content of interactions, if they don’t).

**Anna** (37): Oh... when you have more than one tumblr. boyfriend, you have to be very careful /.../ in what you post. Like for instance, I put something on tumblr. this morning, about hurting people’s feelings, and I wrote a caption underneath that said ‘eyeballs to person who hurt my feelings very badly last Sunday’ and the poor boy who did not hurt my feelings sent me an email about how sorry he was about Sunday. So I was all, ‘oh baby no, I was talking about someone at work’, because I can’t really legitimately tell him, that well, the other tumblr. boyfriend you don’t know about dumped me…

In case someone has two blogs, a sexy and a non-sexy one, higher levels of self-censorship and external pressures were evident for the non-sexy ones, mostly due to family members knowing about it.

**Eric** (late-20s): Whereas on my personal blog, a lot of the times I might want to post something, but I don’t, because I’m afraid what people might think about it. And with Eric’s Blog I am very aware, that if I keep within certain bounds, I can say and do what I want without anyone, who I don’t want to know, finding out.
Looking at this via the concept of identity work we can see an attempt to construct and understand oneself as positively valued in the context of different reference systems. Bloggers are seeking **context-specific coherence**, instead of trying to integrate the different elements of identity into one amalgamated unit.

The agency dilemma was also vivid in participants’ thoughts on **sharing** their blog with their offline peers (friends, spouses, etc.). There were deep seated and contrasting beliefs about whether or not it ought to be shared at all. Often, those who had not shared had made the decision based on fear of judgement. Many also stated that they were not ready to sacrifice that sense of having a place of one’s own.

Considering the fear of repercussions from one’s offline peers, it is understandable that it is easier for people to show their true-self online (Bargh, McKenna, Fitzsimons 2002; Back et al. 2010). This may, however, create a distancing-loop – the pleasure we get from being able to explore and experiment without criticism (Ross 2005; Daneback 2006), increases the likelihood that the online group’s values will become integrated (Fulk 1993) into one’s project of self, which might result in that self-identity growing into something less and less likely to be shared with those initially excluded for fear of stigmatisation.

Those who had shared with their spouses and lovers often reported a twinge of regret as they now had to self-censor their fantasies, desires, or the full scope of their experiences. For some, sharing resulted in the blog changing in its content or its significance; there were also those who felt they should have shared earlier. Also, interestingly, when talking about how the sharing had come about, an internal-external agency combination was often present, usually following the pattern of mutual disclosure.

Self-presentation (Vazire and Gosling 2004; Back et al. 2010) and **impression management** (Goffman 1959) were prominently featured in the narrative of agency. Participants’ stories featured the desire to be seen as **more**. More, than just a sex blogger; more like themselves; more than themselves. There was a coexisting desire to show their true selves, and yet to protect themselves by maintaining what Anna (37) brilliantly called ‘plausible deniability rather than real anonymity’. This is a curious find, because often, when online self-presentation is addressed, the connotation is that what gets presented online, is less real or less truthful (Manago et al. 2008). In this case, the ‘more’ bloggers wished to share, was more in terms of volume, variety and authenticity – non-sexual stuff (that gets shared with people in offline life), in addition to the sexy stuff (some of which is a part of that true-self that doesn’t get shared offline).

The dominant criterion in managing which aspects of oneself to present via the blog, was that of authenticity and sincerity ‘in as far as it goes’, meaning,
people reported being true to themselves in what shines through on the blog, but omitting large chunks (jobs, children, exact geographical location, relationship status) for purposes of discretion or thematic coherence.

Peter (37): I am portraying part of myself, rather than the whole, and I do so in a reasonably honest and sincere way to the extent privacy allows. But at the same time, I do sometimes manage the persona as well. But not overtly, and I try not to do so too much.

Sincerity and honesty were also important because of the therapeutic or self-exploratory role blogging played for many. Olly and Georgina both mentioned it just wouldn’t work as therapy, if they weren’t completely honest in what they posted. Self-exploration and its subsets, like reclaiming one’s sexual identity after childbirth, also played a role in a stronger sense of being internally driven. In addition, agency was constructed via content and blogging as an activity; most participants claimed to blog for themselves not others:

Katie (30): but if people stopped watching I’d still be blogging. I find it really helpful and I love having a place that is my own.

Yet going over something that they had posted and deleting it, or realising, after a night of tumbling from a bar, that perhaps not all of it should be there, was often mentioned, as well as differentiating what one likes (and puts a heart on) from what one wants on their blog. Bloggers also reported having to remind themselves that this was their place and they were free to do with it as they pleased.

Passive or ambivalent agency came to the fore when describing relationships gone wrong, either affairs that should not have happened or situations, where one of the parties got more involved than the other considered appropriate. Holland et al. (1998) speak of moving between inner and social speech in the space of authoring, which is helpful here. Notice the changing agency from internal to ambivalent, to that of a couple’s shared consciousness, and back to passive.

Fred (46): yeah… I got involved in what I might say is an online fantasy romance thing and it… it… got a little more real… let’s say than it should have. /../ and then it… things developed and… we’ve worked through… we’re working through… but there is a trust betrayed.

Also, as a way of self-justification, rationalisation and neutralisation, people (mostly married or involved) almost always portrayed developing a relationship with someone as an accident, or a side product, and never their goal within the blogging experience.
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**Brian** (mid 30s): Absolutely, it’s almost accidental, you know. You happen to be walking down the street and you keep bumping into someone accidentally, instead of deliberately going into that shop that you’re specifically looking to talk to people at, you know.

Passive agency was also used when people explained how they have become more aware of certain fetishes or sexual proclivities that they had not been aware of before, and might now be more interested in pursuing.

*Identity constitution in time and space – third dilemmatic space*

Time-space discontinuities and boundaries seem to be used as a strategic self-narrating tool, to manage ‘memories and desires to reproduce or transform one’s sense of self’ (Alvesson et al. 2008). There are five themes that emerge more clearly when describing participants’ diachronic identity formation – these are space, time, personality, friendships and boundaries.

‘Offline’ and ‘online’ were the main differentiated *spaces* in terms of identity formation, but other spatial differentiations were also evident, *e.g.* different spaces online (tumblr. versus other SNS’s), or sexy spaces versus non-sexy spaces (content driven spatial discontinuities), and, of course, spatial discontinuities between different offline spaces (*e.g.* different schools one has attended or different cities where one has lived).

Participants disclose different amounts and kinds of information in different spaces. Those online spaces that are accessed by one’s offline peer group are often more censored than the NSFW blogs. However, the NSFW blogs usually do not include facial images, one’s specific location, or information about one’s children. Back et al. (2010) wrote that self-presentation online integrates private thoughts, images, and social behaviour, all of which can contain valid information about personality; this is undoubtedly true in NSFW tumblrverse as well, although the image a reader gets of the author emphasises aspects that are different from what the authors children, parents or siblings may know. To claim that one is more accurate or ‘real’ than the other, would however, be an unjust departure from what the bloggers reported.

*Time*, too, is a key factor in describing the changes in identity, often narrated through a ‘before’ and a ‘now’ blog. The blog is seen as a process, the experience portrayed as morphing from one thing into another (*e.g.* entertainment to therapy), or at least starting out as one thing, and then turning into an unexpected (mostly better) experience. The ‘before’ and ‘now’ of blogs is described in terms of the functions it serves for the author, thus, the discontinuities mark
(trans)formative shifts in terms of one’s self-identity, again showing that, as Davies (2003) writes, individuals are constantly constituted and reconstituted through the discursive practices to which they have access.

**Brian** (mid 30s): What started out as a curious adventure for a friend, turned out to be something completely different. It has been moving, enlightening, stimulating and revealing. Both about people, and myself.

One’s sense of **personality or their preferences**: ‘I’m bisexual everywhere’ (Katie, 30), were often constituted as continuous on-, and offline (although ‘more shy offline’ was a parallel strand to claims made in favour of continuity), which can be linked to the need for coherence in identity work. At the same time, a common thread of time and space discontinuity surfaced in terms of specific elements of one’s personality. Tumblr. was repeatedly granted the role of having enhanced the participants’ levels of confidence, self-awareness, and body-positivism.

**Carl** (60): I think I am now more open, actually I discussed this with my wife, she told me, now I see that you are more prepared to accept behaviour that is different from what you would like...

A beautiful juxtaposition of acknowledging or denying the blogging experience’s role in transforming one’s identity was evident in many cases, where, despite outlining the previously mentioned effects it has had on confidence levels, and the like, the participant, when asked directly, reported no significant change. This may be a case of impression management during the interview, or can be attributed to identity work – trying to see one’s identity as more coherent and positively valued.

When talking about specific elements of one’s self-identity, *e.g.* sexual preferences, the narrative often made the offline-online leap from the blog and online interactions into the bedroom, or at least the ‘sexual bucket list’. Starting from the assumption that one can explore (stigmatised) identity elements safely online (Ross 2005, Daneback 2006), we can ask if, in the case of successful online explorations (the feedback from the community makes a practice or a preference seem ‘normal’, the blogger becomes aware of others who like it, and becomes more sure that they themselves do, actually, like it), one is more confident to try and explore them offline.

**Peter** (37): I mean there are certain… um… I guess proclivities that… uh… that I may not have thought about before, didn’t even realise that I find interesting, um… like spanking… or hair pulling. I did not realise that there are plenty of women who like that… so through tumblr. /.../ it’s definitely been a self exploration.
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**Interviewer**: Right, and have you been able to try any of these things in your offline life?

**Peter**: [sighs] um… a little bit, um… the spanking [sounds shy] a little bit, yeah. I’ve incorporated that into my life, the hair pulling not so much. Other than that, not really, I mean, my wife, as much as I love her, is fairly vanilla and not terribly adventurous, uh… and isn’t… uh… open to a lot of experimentation, so um… not as much as I probably would like.

The same could occasionally be observed in the case of political or activist ideas becoming internalised – feminist thought in particular seems to disseminate via sex-blogging. Some participants also mentioned having picked up new, or reheated an old, form of self-expression via their tumbling experience (photography, art).

Another theme apparent in the third dilemmatic space was that of relationships and friendships – here a narrative of continuity was very common. It was important for people to show that they, as friends, are the same online and offline and that the depth of their emotions is also similar.

**Georgina** (41): They’re quite similar actually… I wouldn’t want to… I wouldn’t want to give up my daily life friends for my online friends, but I wouldn’t want to give up my online friends for my daily life friends.

When speaking about the relationship cycle, continuity was also stressed, e.g., participants considered online breakups to be similar to offline ones. However, stressing discontinuity was a common alternative, online relationships were awarded both more, and less, intensity based on different personal experience. A discontinuity was also underscored in what one can, and can’t, do with online friends versus offline friends (offline friends were mostly seen as more suitable for secret, taboo, private discussions).

Finally, I want to briefly address the question of boundaries. Purposeful boundary management was apparent in case of many interviewees, participants worked to keep online and offline apart, either out of fear of repercussions, or out of a need for a private place.

**Brian** (mid 30s): It’s almost like the way you get in the matrix – there’s this other world that you can plug into and you become like this superhero of some sort, and then you plug out of it, and all of the sudden you’re back in this hum drum day to day lifestyle.

The latter, a desire for a place of one’s own, to which no one from their offline lives has access, in which they can indulge, and experiment, with the more fun aspects of their personalities, emerged as one of the more consistent narratives throughout the interviews.
Conclusion

Analysing the interviews of NSFW bloggers with a specific focus on (de)constructing their narrative identities proved fruitful in my quest to understand identity and the role the online experience plays in it. I built the empirical analysis of this chapter on 3 dilemmatic spaces (Bamberg 2010), through which one navigates their selfhood: a dilemma of constant comparisons with others, a dilemma of agency, and transformation of selfhood in time and space.

It is important to stress that even though the offline-online divide was instrumental for bloggers, as they chose which facets of oneself to demonstrate, and the levels of positive affirmation they could find, I would vehemently argue against separating out a so-called ‘online identity’ from an ‘offline identity’. Some researchers have pointed out (Orgad 2009) that boundaries between offline and online are blurring. I would argue that there are no discrete identity-entities, which go specifically offline, or online. **Avatars, profiles and blogs are not our alternative identities, they are temporally fluctuating expressions of a part of an assemblage identity.** Based on this research, there is a collection of self-related elements that get selectively shown, or reflected back, to different people in different communicative contexts, which also constantly change in time. The choice of what specifically gets activated/ included in one’s project of self, today, is largely informed by the discursive practices available, the cultural context surrounding it, and mainly, the interactive resources at hand. Constructing one’s (sexual) self (both on-, and offline, although it’s more visible online), I would argue, is a dia-, or even multilogical, and layered act– and identity element might not be activated at a particular time in a particular setting, but it informs the ones that currently are. All the while, the lifestyle, or the cultural context, that provides some of the discourses is also unfixed, unstable, contradictory, complex and a product of choice, placing people, in a way, into an endless loop of choice. New elements are brought in by other people, selected by the communication medium, filtered by the collectively constructed social reality of an online community.

Bloggers attempt to index their sense of self as distinct, coherent, and positively valued (Alvesson et al. 2008) within an intricate system of offline social pressures, those same pressures mirrored online, and a safe space of the NSFW community. NSFW blogging helps with valuing oneself positively, especially the aspects that may not have been valued thus offline. This happens via new elements being assembled into one’s identity, and previously existing ones being redefined as positive. It also happens via the sense of belonging with a specific group of online others. The newly incorporated identity elements (or the ones allowed out of the murky subconscious) also play a part in indexing oneself as
distinct, e.g., compared to one’s offline others. In search of coherence, bloggers’ emphasise the offline-online continuities in areas like personality traits, and preferences, friendship building and maintaining mechanisms. Still, this is a context-specific coherence the bloggers are seeking. Each assemblage has to work in a particular context, not throughout one’s entire experience of being human. Claims of authenticity and sincerity, that were prominent in most bloggers reflections on their blogging experience, can also be viewed as coherence building tools and multi-layered, context-hopping ones at that. There was a desire to be seen as more like themselves, and simultaneously more than themselves, in the bloggers’ narratives, a coexisting desire to show their true selves, and yet to protect themselves by maintaining plausible deniability.

The identity narratives of NSFW bloggers showed that the variety of elements that can, at any given moment, be included in one’s identity, grew as a result of the experience, while the online community/ interactions/ reality helped to integrate, and in some cases neutralise, those elements. The way internal and external agency coexisted in the bloggers’ daily interactive and expressive decisions on tumblr., and their use of ambivalent agency as a neutralisation technique in morally questionable interactive situations (marital indiscretions; multiple, simultaneous, secretive online affairs), are also functions of identity work and impression management (Goffman 1959), and help us, as people, experience our selfhood as positive and coherent despite constant change.

Acts of identity work were also evident in bloggers’ narratives of how they navigated the first dilemmatic space of constant social comparison, and the third dilemmatic space of stressing coherence across time and space, despite the obvious discontinuities in what one reveals on-, and offline; in different online settings (tumblr. versus Facebook), and to different people (offline friends/ spouses/ online friends/ blog readers). I witnessed an almost compartmentalised approach to selfhood in the choice of which content, relationships, desires, dreams, preferences and aspects of personality were made visible, and simultaneously, a fluid, coherent sense of self, arching over people, relationships and spaces.

Finally I’d like to stress that, based on my research; social media is a space of active social reality construction, and provides us with the people, interactions, and cultural resources we involve in our identity. The interview analysis done for this chapter highlighted some additional interesting questions, such as, ‘can we talk about a sexual filter bubble in NSFW communities?’, ‘is there a positive feedback loop of openness and tolerance that will eventually destabilise the system by prompting exponential growth?’, and ‘what are the hedonistic and therapeutic sex related discourses?’. These will have to be answered in another place.
References


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Appendix

Table 1: Basic information about participants A-F

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Brian</th>
<th>Carl</th>
<th>Daniel</th>
<th>Eric</th>
<th>Fred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender, age, location</strong></td>
<td>Female, 37, USA, Texas</td>
<td>Male, mid-30s, USA, Chicago</td>
<td>Male, 60, Belgium, Brussels</td>
<td>Male, 41, USA, NYC</td>
<td>Male, late 20s; USA, Midwest</td>
<td>Male, 46; New Zealand</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship status</strong></td>
<td>Single offline, dating online</td>
<td>Married w/ kids offline, single online (flirting and sexual interactions)</td>
<td>Married w/ kids offline, no relationships online</td>
<td>Divorced w/ kids offline; single online (flirting and sexual interactions)</td>
<td>Single offline and online</td>
<td>Married offline and online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual identity &amp; lifestyle</strong></td>
<td>Hetero-flexible, more bisexual and somewhat kinky</td>
<td>Heterosexual, edge of vanilla</td>
<td>Heterosexual, vanilla</td>
<td>Heterosexual, somewhat kinky</td>
<td>Heterosexual, vanilla</td>
<td>Heterosexual, vanilla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occup / educat</strong></td>
<td>Education grad. degree</td>
<td>Graphic design uni. degree.</td>
<td>Admin Phd.</td>
<td>Finance uni. degree.</td>
<td>IT, grad. degree.</td>
<td>Civil engin. uni. degree.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

38 A person who is mainly heterosexual, but open to experimentation.
39 A person who’s sexual preferences involve nontraditional, fetish related practices, for example elements of BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, masochism).
40 vanilla is a term used in sexually open discourse to categorise people who engage in traditional, one on one, heterosexual, non-fetish sex.
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Table 1 cont.: Basic information about participants G-T

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Georgina</th>
<th>Katie</th>
<th>Lisa</th>
<th>Olly</th>
<th>Peter</th>
<th>Theresa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gender, age, location</strong></td>
<td>Female, 41; Nebraska, USA</td>
<td>Female, 30; Toronto, Canada</td>
<td>Female, 26; UK</td>
<td>Transgender, 28; Kansas, USA</td>
<td>Male, 37; Pennysyl. USA</td>
<td>Female, 37; NYC, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship status</strong></td>
<td>Married w/ kids offline and online (flirting online)</td>
<td>Consensual non-monog. marriage online and offline, w/ kids, (kids not referenced online)</td>
<td>In a relationship offline; doesn’t reference online apart when asked, used to flirt and have sexual interactions online, not any more</td>
<td>In a relationship offline and online</td>
<td>Married w/ kids offline and online; (kids not referenced online) flirting and sexual interactions online;</td>
<td>Married online and offline;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual identity &amp; lifestyle</strong></td>
<td>Heterosexual, edge of vanilla</td>
<td>Bisexual, kinky</td>
<td>Bisexual, kinky</td>
<td>Queer / pansexual; kinky and polyamorous</td>
<td>Heterosexual, edges of vanilla</td>
<td>Bisexual, poly-curious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occup / educat.</strong></td>
<td>Software development, high-school.</td>
<td>Child and youth counselor; diploma degree, currently working on a BA.</td>
<td>Technical writer BSc.</td>
<td>Baker/ student therapist; working on second university degree.</td>
<td>Lawyer, grad. degree</td>
<td>Fundraising; uni. degree.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

41 A person who is simultaneously in many emotional/sexual relationships.

42 A person who is curious about the polyamorous lifestyle, perhaps experimenting, undecided.