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Introduction

Since its creation, the World Wide Web has had an ever-changing appearance. New websites rise to the top daily, while popular ones are on their way down. In the twenty years of its existence, the commercial Internet has never stayed the same; instead, it has always changed and reinvented itself. Nowadays, users are especially responsible for its exciting and interesting new look. Websites like *YouTube*, *Facebook* or *Wikipedia* would not be able to exist if its users were not willing to constantly upload new content. *Web 2.0* has turned its users into “*prosumers*”, people who consume and create content at the same time. *Web 2.0* is an updated version of the old Internet – but more interactive and network orientated. It allows users to create, share, link, or like videos, pictures, music or words. Above all, *Web 2.0* brings people together. While the websites of this new Internet utilize a large amount of user-created content, they also give back to their respective communities. Most importantly, *Web 2.0* sites allow their users to create completely new identities.

Our identities can be compared to the Internet itself – always transforming and never staying the same. Just like the face of the Internet changes when we move between websites, our identities change when we switch between social situations in real life. Today, we are at a place in time in which the Internet allows its users to find new social situations and, by this means, explore new aspects of their identities. On some websites, people are no longer forced to embed their appearance into their identity, while on other websites a person’s looks are put into focus and idealized. In either way, people leave real life (RL) in order to find new aspects of who they are. With the increasing importance of social networking sites in users lives, their RL identities seem to merge with their virtual identities. I have decided to investigate how young people create online identities and how these influence their offline identities.

In the following thesis, I will focus my analysis around the *Digital Generation*, or people whose lives have been connected since the day they were born. These people are the driving force behind social networking sites and constantly upload a stream of creative content. It is in these networks where adolescents have created second realities of themselves. In the following chapters, I am going to analyze two virtual realities that the *Digital Generation* inhabits: One is called *Facebook*; the other, *World of Warcraft*. Both are leading representatives of *Web 2.0*. In this thesis, I

will argue that adolescents use both of these virtual spaces to create identities that differ from the identities they have in real life. I will analyze how members of the *Digital Generation* construct online identities that enhance their real life identities as well as harm their offline selves. Some of these identities are connected to their offline identities, while others stay disconnected and float freely in the void of the Internet. I will explain that these online identities can be very strong and stable, formed in places far away from the influence of adults and other authorities; however, I will also draw attention to the fact that peer pressure has a hand in the developing process of many of these identities. Above all, I want to highlight that the Internet gives adolescents the opportunity to explore and experiment with uncharted identities, ones that they would not be able to experience in their real lives.

Due to the astonishing rate in which the Internet has taken over our lives in the last decade, I have decided to investigate these very interesting processes of identity formation. Every day, I see people on the street, at university or in cafes that are constantly logged into their social networks, always communicating with their smartphones, laptops and tablets. It seems like the whole human race is evolving into some kind of cyborg creature. With our smartphones and tablets always nearby, the Internet has become an omnipresent part of our lives. I believe that we have turned into an “always on” society – always on the Internet, always on *Facebook*, always on our smartphone, always checking our e-mails, always ready to communicate. As the amount of digital communication increases, people also seem willing to reduce their real life contact with other humans. On account of this changing situation, I have decided to explore how the Internet influences the identities of those people, who were born into this “always on” society.

The following chapter will give a short introduction to those theoretical terms that form the foundation of my thesis.

1. Theoretical Foundation

1.1 The Hidden Generation

We live in a consumer society. The children of this society, the members of this generation, are leading lives that are equipped with powerful Internet connections, laptops, smartphones, MP3 players, tablets, PlayStations, Xboxes, Skype, Amazon, messenger services and social network accounts. Today's teenagers are surrounded by a great amount of digital devices and many spend almost as much time in the online world as the offline world. Therefore, this generation can be referred to as the *Digital Generation*.

It is quite difficult to delineate the *Digital Generation* from any previous generation because it does not seem to have any other specific characteristics besides unequivocal access to digital media. Members of the *Digital Generation* were born roughly between 1989 and the early 2000s and have been surrounded by technology since the beginning of their lives. Experts refer to them as not only the *Digital Generation*¹, but also as the *Net Generation*², *Digital Natives*³, *Millenials*⁴, *Generation @*⁵ or the *Gamer Generation*⁶. The struggle to pinpoint an exact description of this generation may suggest the lack of a generational identity. However, I believe that this generation has its own identity; indeed, it is just not as obvious as that of other generations. The following paragraphs discuss some of this generation's characteristics.

Marc Prensky, by coining the terms *Digital Natives* and *Digital Immigrants*, presents one of the most important indications for generational identity (2001).

¹ David Buckingham: *Is there a Digital Generation* (2006)

² Don Tapscott: *Growing up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation* (1998)

³ Marc Prensky: *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* (2001)

⁴ Neil Howe & William Strass: *Millenials Rising* (2000)

⁵ Horst Opaschowski: *Generation @. Die Medienrevolution entlässt ihre Kinder: Leben im Informationszeitalter* (1999)

⁶ John C, Beck & Mitchel Wade: *The Kids Are Alright. How the Gamer Generation Is Changing the Workplace.* (2006)

Prensky believes that the members of the *Digital Generation* have been surrounded by digital media every day of their lives and have become “native speakers” of the language used by the electronic devices that make up their world (1). Older generations, on the other hand, are described as being *Digital Immigrants*, or people who are “*speaking with an accent*”, because they are not as acquainted with the new technology as the natives (1). De Witt supports this point of view by explaining that, compared to the open-minded youth, older generations are more reserved and rather insecure when it comes using new technologies (2000: 6).

Regarding the strong presence of adults (or *Digital Immigrants*) on the Internet, it is rather difficult to make a clear distinction between *Digital Natives* and *Immigrants*. For example, half of all *Facebook* users are more than 22 years old⁷ and a large number of *World of Warcraft* players cannot be considered adolescents. Whether the *Digital Generation* likes it or not, adults inhabit some of the spaces that constitute their world. Buckingham maintains this perception by stating that one cannot clearly define the *Digital Generation*, because “as the pace of social change accelerates, the boundaries between generations are likely to become blurred” (2006: 2). Some experts (Schulmeister 2009, Seufert 2007) believe that membership to the *Digital Generation* solely depends on the amount of time that an individual spends immersed in digital technology.

While it cannot be denied that many adults are present in the *Digital Generation's* world, I want to dismiss the idea that this generation has an open membership. Truly, adults can acquire the skills and knowledge that defines the *Digital Generation*, however, one does not become part of this generation by simply knowing how to create a *YouTube* video, *Facebook* account or *World of Warcraft* character.

Most of the time, a generational identity evolves from conflict between the old and new generations. If, for example, the old generation had very conservative values and morals, the identity of the next generation would probably be more liberal. A generational identity always needs dissociation from the former generation in order to create its identity. Hall explains that identification is a process that “operates across difference [and] entails discursive work [such as] the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries [and] the production of ‘frontier effects’” (1996: 2).

⁷ <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/mediawire/190542/facebook-now-has-1-billion-active-users-more-than-one-third-get-news-there/>

The problem of the *Digital Generation* is that it lacks exclusion. Today's youth shares the same spaces and tools of meaning-making as older generations. This represents an identity conflict but does not necessarily imply that the *Digital Generation* has no identity at all. Buckingham points out that some generations (e.g. the *Baby Boom Generation*) may be more self-conscious and self-reflexive than others and, hence, come to claim greater social significance. However, while the *Digital Generation* may not be as present in social discourse as other generations have been, it would be unjustifiable to deny its existence and its very own identity.

In addition to the numerous attributes that describe the *Digital Generation*, I would like to introduce a further depiction. In my eyes, the *Digital Generation* operates in the dark to a large extent; that is, in an area that is unsupervised and not under the surveillance of large parts of the media, parents, teachers and other authorities. The *Digital Generation* stays unrecognized because most of the actions that constitute this generation are happening on the Internet, in spaces that restrict their access to members of this generation⁸.

Although young and old have access to the Internet, adolescents try to create adult-free spaces. Furthermore, adolescents interact in online spaces and share content that simply does not evoke the interest of older users. The greatest discrepancy between the generations rests in how both groups use *Web 2.0*. I believe that the way adolescents use online spaces and create online content is very different from adults. Therefore, the generational identity lies not in the access to the new technology and virtual worlds, but in how people make use of these spaces.

Before scrutinizing the identity performance of adolescents on *Facebook* and *World of Warcraft*, I must clarify what exactly is meant by the term "identity". This will not only help to better understand the concept of generational identity, but will prepare the foundation for most of the analysis conducted in this paper.

⁸ Most adolescents interact only with their peers on *Facebook* and keep adults from accessing their private profiles.

1.2 The Multiplicity of Identity

In the earlier days of humanity, people constructed and stabilized their identities by turning towards religion, predefined social roles and strong family ties. In those premodern societies, one's identity was fixed, solid, and stable.

In comparison to those premodern times, our postmodern identities and the way they are constructed seem to have radically changed. In the year 2012, we are living in a highly globalized and consumer-oriented world. The secularization of our societies has proceeded continuously, and instead of religious values, we are now following material ones. Our identities no longer seem to be carved in stone but are said to be plastic and changeable, always adapting to the respective social or cultural situation (Barker 2004: 93). Kellner mentions that, especially with the beginning of the consumer and media societies that sprung up after World War II, identity was more often perceived as being some sort of performance (232). People started to play with their identities by putting on different clothes or presenting certain lifestyles, wearing masks like actors who slip in and out of their roles. This view of identity clearly contradicts the former essentialist notion of identity, which, as Hall explains, assumed the existence of fully constituted, separate, distinct, authentic and original identities (1996: 89). Cerulo mentions that this conception of identity has been replaced within cultural studies by social constructionism, the anti-essentialist point of view (1997: 387). Anti-essentialists perceive identities as being discursive-performative, and thus, always renegotiable through communication and social performance. Hall emphasizes that the anti-essentialist point of view sees identity as a process constructed through points of similarity and difference that is never completed (1996: 89). Furthermore, since identity is also viewed as being relational, always depending on specific social or cultural situations, anti-essentialists believe that a person has several identities rather than only one.

If we now apply the anti-essentialist view to the use of the Internet, we are able to observe that the virtual world has severely increased the possibilities for identity performance, and thus, for the creation of multiple identities. In many places on the Internet, users have no restrictions when they construct their identities but are able to be whoever they want to be. Hall explains that we construct our identities by "using the resources of history, language and culture in a process of becoming rather than being" (4). Since the construction of identities is a process, they can never be fixed,

are always incomplete and always in the making. Hall's notion is supported by Buckingham, who talks about the online self as becoming some sort of project (10). This means that when we represent ourselves on the Internet – whether on social networking sites, gaming platforms, blogs or chat rooms – we are always being self-reflexive by making decisions about how we want to be perceived by others. This form of identity performance is primarily based on the question of who we want to be rather than on who we are. The Internet gives its users the possibility to play around and explore identities. People are able to experience aspects of their selves that they might have been able to access in the offline world. However, with a greater number of possibilities, identities seem to become more unstable, an aspect which may lead to an identity crisis.

In this thesis, I will analyze how adolescents use the Internet to create different identities. Some of those identities will be similar to their offline identities while others will differ completely from their real-life selves. As long as the performer is able to stage a believable identity, he or she is able to take on any identity he or she wishes. Before I investigate identity performance on *Facebook* and *World of Warcraft*, I will explain the main characteristics that constitute such an action.

1.3 Performing Identity to Protect Identity

*All the world's a stage,
and all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.⁹*

When discussing the idea of identity performance, Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is a beneficial point of reference and will greatly help to understand the different areas and ways identity performance can take place.

A performance, as Goffman defines it, is any "activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any other participant" (1959: 26). From this definition, we are now able to derive specific parts that construct an identity performance.

At the beginning of any performance stands the performer, who, as Carlson explains, is trying to pretend to be someone than he or she is not (1996: 4). Park calls this "playing a role" and claims that we only know each other and even ourselves in these roles (1950: 249). He, therefore, supports the above quote that we are always and in every situation playing a role. Park continues by pointing out that this role, this mask that we are wearing, represents "the concept we have formed of ourselves" and, more or less, the person that we would like to be (250). According to this, the performer, as Goffman describes, is always presenting an idealized version of the self (44). However, this behavior should not be judged as pure deception, because, "if we never tried to seem a little better than we are, how could we improve or train ourselves from the outside inward?" (Smith 1853: 75).

Since a performance always takes place within interaction, the performer also needs an audience. When a person is performing, he or she always intends to evoke a particular response from this audience. While performing, the performer always has

⁹ Shakespeare (*As You Like It*, act 2, scene 7)

to act according to “those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity” (Klein, Spears and Reicher 2007: 4). Therefore, “a performance highlights the common official values of the society in which it occurs” (Goffman: 45).

While having explained the performer and his audience, we now turn our attention to the stage on which the performance takes place. Goffman differentiates between the “front stage” and the “back stage” on which a person may perform. Most of the performance takes place on the front stage, where the performer as well as his or her audience is present (32). The back stage, on the other hand, is characterized by the lack of an audience. This is the place, as Goffman explains, where the performer is able to safely move away from the idealized version he or she is presenting on the front stage (32). Hence, people perform their identities on the front stage in order to protect their more vulnerable back stage identities.

2. Introducing *Facebook*

With over one billion active members, *Facebook.com* is the largest social networking site on the Internet. Mark Zuckerberg and some friends from Harvard University founded the network in 2004. Initially, *Facebook* was created to connect Harvard students with each other and with other Ivy League universities. Nowadays, the network has expanded and is open to everyone although most people use it to stay in touch with their friends and family. People get together in groups and organize events; they share videos and music and upload pictures. The network gives people, especially adolescents, a space to come together after school and hang out, flirt, gossip, play and share popular culture. Adolescents also use the website to negotiate identity and status. *Facebook* enables teenagers struggling to find their place in this world to figure out who they are, who they want to be and what their place in their peer group is. For many adolescents, *Facebook* has become a second home. They are logged into the network when they are at home, at school or at any other place. Laptops and smartphones enable the *Digital Generation* to be constantly online and always accessible. Organizing homework, dates, parties, gossip, relationships and everything else important in an adolescent's life has been relocated into the online world. For many, *Facebook* has become a mandatory element of being a teenager and is used to maintain a healthy social life. Therefore, losing access to social media would be a major catastrophe.

Facebook is a space where adolescents are able to act without the surveillance of their parents or any other authorities. The network is their realm and runs by their rules. The local *Facebook* friend network of any teenager could be compared to a schoolyard, an active microcosm in its own; however, there is one crucial difference between what goes on during recess and what happens on *Facebook*. The schoolyard is a closed space and most things that happen there will only become known to students in their school. *Facebook*, on the other hand, is a highly public space and private information can quickly be taken from an individual's control.

In the following chapters, I will analyze how adolescents create and perform their identities on *Facebook*. I will scrutinize a world that the *Digital Generation* calls home – a world in which they can play and be creative, but also a world that can make its members rather vain and pretentious.

2.1 Writing One's Self Into Being

The first thing a person does when signing up for *Facebook* is to fill his or her profile with textual information. One could say that one writes his or her online self into being. In a section called "About", *Facebook* urges its users to reveal as much private information about themselves as possible. This section contains several different boxes, which the user may fill with the relevant information. After a user's completion of the "About" section, his or her friends will be able to access information about his or her current occupation, education, relationship status, age, e-mail address and mobile phone number, as well as his or her religious and political views. In a further step, the user is given the opportunity to disclose his or her precise whereabouts, which includes information about his or her exact home address as well as the city he or she lives in and its zip code. Finally, the user may compose a short statement in a box called "About You". *Facebook*, in order to allow its users an overview about the information they have already posted, has placed a progress bar in the top right corner of the "About" section. The progress bar will slowly fill up as a user adds information to his or her profile.

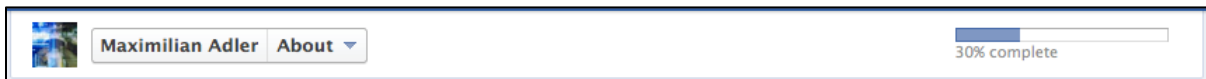


Figure 1. The progress bar.

On the one hand, the progress bar helps the users to understand how much information has been revealed up to this point. However, on the other hand, it also incites the users to post more private data. I believe that humans always desire wholeness or completion. Many users might give away much more information than they intended, only to fill up the progress bar and reach the 100%. By using this psychological trick, *Facebook* may obtain a greater amount of personal data. Even before the Internet, private data about users became a commodity bought by companies for advertising purposes, and this continues to this day. Many users likely do not understand the processes taking place behind the scenes of the website, otherwise it is inexplicable why so many people do not hesitate when it comes to handing out private information about themselves, their actions, interactions and behaviors. Plenty of users believe that only they and their *Facebook* friends are able to access the data they produce on the network. This, however, is not the case. To

understand this great misconception means one must understand how *Facebook* and the people who use *Facebook* think about privacy. *Facebook*'s idea of privacy differs greatly from that of many of its users. While *Facebook* wants its users to post virtually all of their private data, most of its users have a great desire for privacy. The reason why so many users post so much information on *Facebook* is that they misinterpret the context that they are working in as well as the audience with which they are interacting. When people post on *Facebook*, they trust the network and their own audience to keep the published data within the boundaries of their local network or, at least, the website. Very often, information intended only for the eyes of one's *Facebook* audience finds its way out of the imagined safe space and into the infinite depth of the Internet. If this information is in any way a threat to a person's *Facebook* identity, it is an even greater threat to that person's real life identity. Such misuse of private data happens very often to adolescents, especially in situations when they inconsiderately post private information about themselves. However, it would be unjust to solely blame adolescent indiscretion for such events. *Facebook* has changed its context and settings so many times that it is very difficult to find the line that separates public information from private. While these changes will be thoroughly discussed in a later chapter, it is important to understand that most people are not very interested in publicly revealing their private lives. However, since the introduction of *Facebook* in 2004, the network has slowly abolished the boundaries that separate the network from the rest of the Internet. Many people do not understand the changes that have been made and believe that the network is as secure as it has always been.

Nevertheless, there is also another reason why *Facebook* wants its users to post as much information as possible. The successful concept of *Facebook* is based on its connection to real life identities. People simply recreate their offline social networks in an online context. This represents the main reason why users are always coming back to *Facebook*. They are able to interact with their real life friends, make real life plans and exchange real life pictures. If a person was to make up a completely new identity, it would be possible for him or her to make many *Facebook* friends, but he or she would not be able to communicate much outside the network. On *Facebook*, users prefer to converse with people they already know in real life. Due to this reason, the concept is very successful, and *Facebook* urges its users to create online

identities that are a reproduction of their offline identities. In a posting on their website, the company states:

*Facebook is a community where people use their real identities. We require everyone to provide their real names, so you always know who you're connecting with. (...) Pretending to be anything or anyone is not allowed. (...) Your Facebook profile should not show you any different than how you really are.*¹⁰

This restrictive request by *Facebook* puts users into a dilemma that is caused by two crucial factors. First, as established in the introduction of this thesis, identity can be perceived as being multifaceted, plastic and changeable. On the other hand, the essentialist point of view, evidently also represented by *Facebook*, suggests that there is a singular identity that is fixed and solid. A statement made by Mark Zuckerberg in 2009 exemplifies this conception: "Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity".¹¹

Renowned psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung would have easily disproved Zuckerberg's beliefs. Jung believed that every person adapts his or her behavior according to the social situation he or she is in (1962). He described this as changing between "personas". Derived from Latin, the word *persona* can be translated into mask or theatrical mask. Therefore, Jung used the term *persona* to imply that we always wear masks in social situations. People change their masks in order to influence other people's perceptions of them. This concept not only supports the idea that a person's identity is multifaceted, but also that identities are being performed. Thus, *personas* do not only help us switch between our identities more easily, they also provide us with the opportunity to keep certain aspects of our identity hidden.

Zuckerberg's request for a singular identity contradicts the human nature of creating multiple *personas*. This can become especially problematic when we observe that most people interact with different social groups on *Facebook*. Adolescents may be connected to their friends, their families and their teachers at the

¹⁰ Stated on: <http://www.facebook.com/help.php?ref=pf>

¹¹ As seen on: <http://michaelzimmer.org/2010/05/14/facebooks-zuckerberg-having-two-identities-for-yourself-is-an-example-of-a-lack-of-integrity/>

same time. In real life, the communication with members of each of these social groups would take place in a different social context. A person would then adjust his or her identity according to the demands of the context. On *Facebook*, all of the different contexts are put together, creating a completely new situation. Many teenagers have ceased to understand the context in which they are interacting. The network has become so transparent and its users have become so reckless that many do not understand the audience to which they are performing. Furthermore, the demand to focus on the performance of a singular identity has the possibility to evoke some sort of conflict within the teenagers. Questions can arise in which they ask themselves who they are and how they should best represent that identity.

The second crucial factor that complicates users' identity construction on *Facebook* is revealed after accessing the "About" section of the profile. As has been explained, this section contains several boxes that the user may fill with information. Each box is equipped with an "Edit Profile" button, which enables the users to add and change information. At first sight, this function seems to adopt the notion that identity can be constantly reconstructed. It suggests that one's *Facebook* identity, much like one's real life identity, can be permanently rewritten. However, at a closer look, this notion is quickly disproved. Almost all of the information that can be put in the boxes has to be selected from a list. Everything, including the places a person has worked, the school they are attending, their religion, their political party or the books and movies they like, has to be selected from existing lists. Only the "About You" box gives users the possibility to express a small amount of individuality.

Besides the fact that revealing so much information about oneself can be problematic in itself, *Facebook's* demand for the creation of what they call "authentic representations" are not possible under these circumstances. The tabular listing of preexisting information only allows the construction of an official public identity, which often seems to be very similar to that of most other users. Since the tastes and values of a teenager often conform with those of his or her peer group, an individual identity on *Facebook* has the possibility to very quickly turn into a collective identity. Furthermore, Wiedemann explains that this tabular form of the profile information enables mutual profile observation and, thus, content evaluation (2010: 71).

Due to these two factors, it is truly impossible to represent all aspect of one's identity on *Facebook*, but rather, only one of them. Jager, who also addresses this topic, claims that the Internet has made adolescents develop two different faces (2010). One face, he says, is the private one, revealing true thoughts and emotions, while the other face is directed towards the public, slowly brought to perfection through *Facebook* and *YouTube* accounts. Jager argues that the public face becomes more and more important, "like an evolutionary development demanded for survival".¹² It seems like Jager also would support Jung's persona theory by pointing out the "social network" mask that is becoming increasingly important for teenagers. Additionally, he suggests that adolescents try to make their online identities flawless by putting a lot of attention and thought into their development. This notion accords with Goffman's concept of the performer, who, as he points out, always tries to present an idealized version of who he or she is (44). This also brings us back to Stuart Hall, who states that identity is not about the questions of "who we are" or "where we came from", but rather "what we might become" (1996: 4). This means that the process of identity construction on *Facebook* is about the presentation of a perfect identity. Each performer is able to carefully select pieces of information about themselves, highlight positive aspects of their identity and hide negative ones. In a way, this process seems like the product development of a company rather than identity formation that takes place in our everyday lives. After his research of Facebook user profiles, neuropsychologist Tom Boyd states that people's self-presentation on profiles is "kind of like creating a brand", trying to represent who one "truly" is¹³ (Boss 2009). Similar to commercials on television, a high level of embellishment characterizes most *Facebook* profiles, a circumstance that has made many researchers start to believe that today's youth is developing an obsession about self-image (Boss 2009).

This chapter was meant to illustrate users' first steps on *Facebook*, as well as give a general introduction to the topic of identity on the Internet. Before the actual interaction with other users takes place, a person has to produce a textual description of his or her identity. Due to the tabular listing of some of the identity traits, users make their identities very uniform and easy to compare. The more a user contrasts his or her identity with other users, the more this user will be interested in

¹² As said in an interview with Rineke Dijkstra in the *Handlesblad*.

¹³ As quoted by Suzan Boss in her online article „*Social-Networking Sites Draw Teens In*“ (2009)

trying to improve their own identity. This means that *Facebook* identities are becoming idealized and flawless through a process that aims to create one's own perfection. The kinds of identities created on *Facebook* always depend on the audience of the performer. An adolescent will, without a doubt, construct a completely different identity than an adult user would. Many younger *Facebook* users are willing to reveal more private information, hoping to make their profile stand out from the crowd. More information about one's personality means a more individualized identity. During the identity construction process, many users tend to forget that revealing more personal information results in less privacy. Very often, the size of the audience of one's identity performance is misinterpreted or forgotten in the process of creating the perfect representation of one's self.

While users' profiles are often without blemishes, the network's possibilities for identity construction are not. The company believes that every person has only one sole identity. *Facebook* claims that everything that goes beyond this singular identity would be a lack of integrity. However, this attitude lets us assume that *Facebook* does not understand the very processes that are taking place on its very own platform. People are performing their identities; they are putting on masks like actors, hiding certain aspects of their identities while making others more salient. By this means, these masks protect the users by making their identities less vulnerable.

The next chapter focuses on visual identity creation rather than textual information. I am going to analyze how people use pictures of themselves in order to construct a certain identity. Above all, I will answer the question of if this section of the profile allows the molding of a more individualized identity.

2.2 Picturing Who I Want to Be

The *Facebook* profile picture is located in the upper left corner of everyone's profile and shows up next to every post or comment that a user makes. All users of *Facebook* can upload such a picture to their profile in order to be recognized by their network friends, but they are not required to. I believe that the profile picture is the cornerstone of a user's *Facebook* identity because it is the main representative of the user's offline self. Every person on the Internet, not only one's friends and family, is able to view this picture. Whenever a connection between two users is established, profile pictures are exchanged and, if a mutual interest exists, a relationship is created. Profile pictures can be compared to calling cards that are handed out to people with whom one wants to interact. For many adolescents, the importance of the profile picture is very significant.

The profile picture can be viewed as the main pillar of one's *Facebook* identity. This picture is the focal point of every user's profile page and shows up next to every post that a person makes on *Facebook*. In the last chapter, it was mentioned that *Facebook* users tend to idealize themselves when they compose a textual description of their identity. This kind of conduct continues when it comes to the creation of visual representations of one's identity.

Teenagers especially, as well as others, prefer to upload profile pictures in which they and their peers consider themselves good and casual looking. When browsing through the profile pictures of adolescents, I was able to witness a certain code of behavior when it comes to the style of those pictures. Most profile pictures show the profile owner alone or at times with a friend. Certain facial expressions and poses have been established and adopted by many in the adolescent *Facebook* community. In the following section, I will analyze two of these expressions and poses. I will refer to these poses as the "self-shot" and the "mirror-shot".

The self-shot is one of the most popular kinds of profile pictures on *Facebook*. This particular picture can be produced with a digital camera or webcam. To take the picture, one simply has to hold the camera away from one's body, put the focus on one's face, look good and press the trigger. This maneuver may be executed with one or both arms.

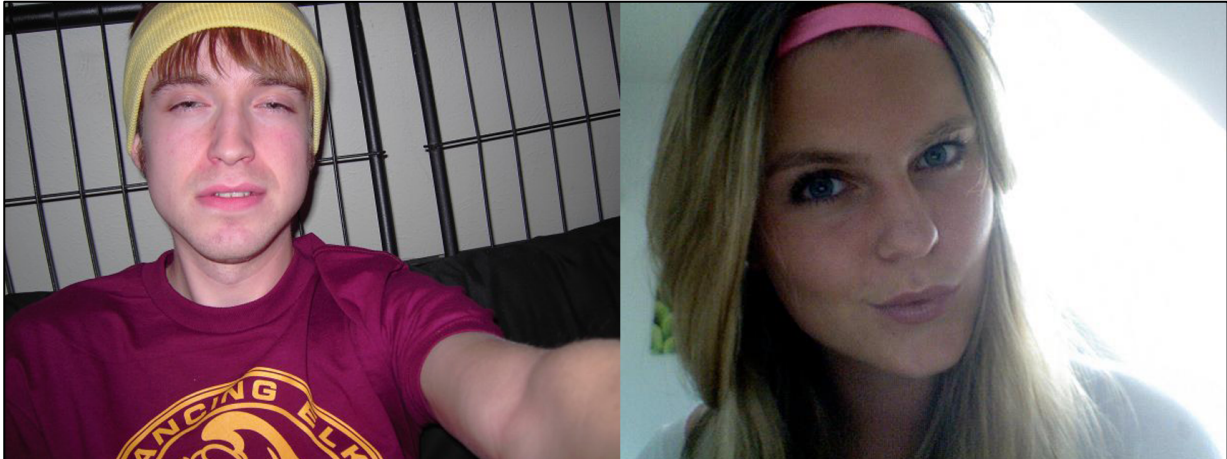


Figure 2. *Facebook* self-shot.¹⁴

Figure 2 shows examples of both self-shot possibilities – the left picture was taken with a digital camera, while the right picture was snapped with a stationary camera on a laptop or computer. The advantage of the latter is that the frame can be viewed on the computer screen before the picture is taken, thus enabling the photographer to adjust his or her pose. Additionally, because one's arms cannot be seen on the picture, the whole scene seems less staged and more professional. Figure 2 also exemplifies the great difference between male and female profile pictures. While boys mostly prefer to pose in a cool and laid-back fashion, many girls try to look attractive and slightly seductive.

The advantages of the self-shot in general are that somebody can take as many pictures as they want to ensure that one shot is truly perfect. By this means, the girl in figure 2 was able to produce a picture in which she looks very attractive and which will bring her a great amount of positive feedback from her peers. The girl also performs a facial expression that has become very popular among adolescent girls in

¹⁴ Source: Facebook.com (All Facebook pictures have been used with the approval of their respective owners)

the last few years and has recently turned into an Internet meme¹⁵. Many teenage girls pose for photographs by putting their lips into a position that resembles a mixture between a smile and a kiss. Allegedly, this pose was supposed to make one's lips more voluminous, one's jawline more defined and one's cheekbones more prominent. However, as often happens on the Internet when too many people copy something, the pose became outdated, uncool and something to make fun of. After the peak of its popularity was reached, the pose has turned into an Internet meme that is nowadays known as the “duckface”.

Another very popular but sometimes ridiculed pose is the “mirror-shot”. The mirror-shot is a self-shot taken with a smartphone while posing in front of a mirror. Mirror-shots are primarily produced in bathrooms, which can be traced back to two principal reasons. First, bathrooms usually have at least one large mirror and good lighting, which are both necessary factors if one wants to produce a stylish picture all by oneself. Second, because many teenagers share their bedrooms with someone else, the bathroom is often the only place that a teenager can experience real privacy.



Figure 3. Facebook mirror-shot.¹⁶

Figure 3 demonstrates my observation that boys and girls post pictures in which they present themselves in certain standardized poses. While the girl tries to look cute and beautiful, the boy presents himself in a nonchalant and bold manner. The

¹⁵ A meme can be a picture, image, video, hashtag or even a misspelled word that is spread via the Internet. Memes are usually hyped on social networking sites, blogs, Tumblr or meme-specific websites. Memes are copied and pasted, reproduced or remixed.

¹⁶ Source: Facebook.com (All Facebook pictures have been used with the approval of their respective owners)

figure also exemplifies the phenomenon that, on *Facebook*, girls will get much more attention than boys. As can be noticed, Janine received 53 likes and 81 comments, while Sebastian only got eleven likes and three comments. While girls frequently comment on their female friends' pictures and compliment them on their looks, boys would rarely, if ever, do this to a picture of their male friends. However, boys enjoy commenting on and liking the posts of their female friends, seeing this as an opportunity to flirt and stay in contact with a girl. In the end, a girl will get compliments from girls and boys, while a boy will likely only get those from girls. Furthermore, public communication on *Facebook* is slightly more complicated for girls than it is for boys. If a girl comments on the picture of a boy who is liked by another girl, it could lead to trouble. A girl could also quickly earn a bad reputation in her female peer group if she frequently comments on boys' posts. Boys, on the other hand, try to impress their male friends by leaving coquettish comments on a popular girl's post. As a result, girls generally receive more attention on *Facebook* than boys. Nevertheless, the confidence of both genders is boosted equally by every like and comment that they receive. If the boy and girl in figure 3 are told how beautiful they are, this may lead them to continue to post pictures on which they idealize their appearance. Not only will this behavior make people post more pictures online, this will also make people feel more confident and attractive if they receive enough comments and likes on their posts.

Taking a look at the communication that takes place next to the pictures, we are able to observe that they are also affected by a certain standardized behavior. In a self-reciprocating fashion, every compliment received about a picture is usually acknowledged by the person who posted the original post. If not, the person who complimented the person's post might feel disappointed, neglected and unpopular. Furthermore, if one thanks the flatterer for his or her comment, one can be sure that he or she will leave a comment once the next picture has been uploaded. Only if one cultivates their *Facebook* friendships, one will be able to maintain or even increase the number of likes and comments received.

Figure 3 also shows that both comment sections contain an incredibly high number of spelling mistakes. Janine, especially, seems to completely neglect her spelling. While at first sight, this may lead to the assumption that our school system has failed miserably, this behavior is well thought out and intended. On *Facebook*, language is used as a tool to express one's individuality and creative style. Let's take

the word “Schatz” as an example. In the figure, Janine’s boyfriend Daniel uses the diminutive “schatzii” to refer to his girlfriend. Janine, on the other hand, spells the word “schadz”, and by this, demonstrates her individual style. Nevertheless, there is nothing on the Internet that cannot be copied. Individualized word forms are quickly used en masse and subsequently can no longer be viewed as unique. By this means, the word “Schatz” is constantly evolving and numerous new versions such as “Shads” to “Shaaadzii” are being created. We can conclude that language, just like the poses and expressions in the pictures, is being standardized and therefore contributes to the creation of a collective rather than an individual identity.

Communication on *Facebook* is generally short and unsubstantial. It resembles the communication that one has when interacting via text messages. However, while one’s mobile phone communication is abbreviated because the technology is limited, the reasons why people communicate in that manner on *Facebook* are different. Communication on the social network is completely public. One’s whole network (friends and their friends) can read everything that is being written. Out of the fear of embarrassing oneself or writing the wrong things, comments are kept short, superficial and close to the opinions that are shared by others.

Ultimately, the mirror-shot suffered the same fate as the duckface and became an Internet meme. I believe that the primary reason people started to make fun of the duckface self-shot and the mirror-shot is that the poses reflect the insecurities of their producers. Both poses convey the feeling that the person who took this picture is rather vain, self-centered and, most of all, confident. However, while the first two adjectives might be applicable, it is questionable if the last one suits everybody. I believe that adolescents who produce these kinds of profile pictures are very unassertive about their own identity. In real life, it is often observable that teenagers hide their insecurities behind a highly exaggerated laid-back and cool behavior. Adolescents tend to copy the conduct of their peers, because they are uncertain which behavior their audience validates as being cool. The exact same processes can be examined on *Facebook*. The teenagers’ identities are often so unstable that they need to orientate themselves with their peers for markers of cool. It must be borne in mind that adolescents perform their identities on *Facebook* is several times more severe than that at school. On *Facebook*, a person’s whole peer group is able to observe and assess every move that this person makes. One false move can

cause great laughter and ridicule. For the performer, *Facebook* represents a stage that could not be any more public. I believe that these insecurities are a major influence on the style and content of a person's profile picture. If the popular people are making duckfaces on Facebook and then start to pose in front of a mirror, these poses will become accepted as the new cool by everybody else.

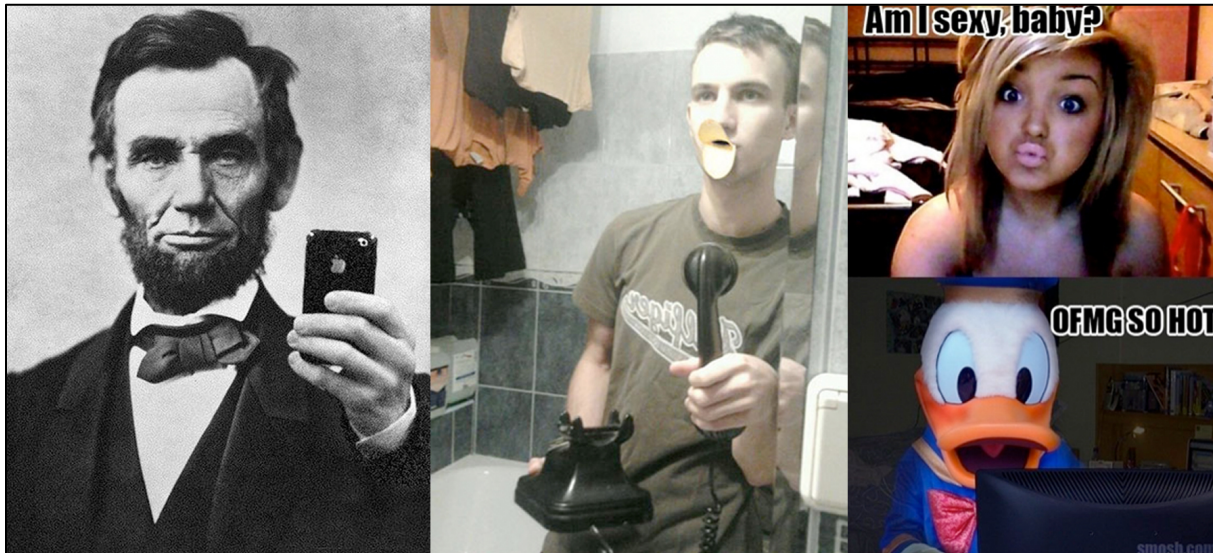


Figure 4. Mirror-shot and duckface memes.¹⁷

In the sphere of the Internet, the end of a trend is often marked by the first memes that start to be posted on the social networks. Internet memes can spread incredibly fast as they are posted and shared by millions of the networked youth. Figure 4 shows two different memes. The first picture represents the mirror-shot meme and the third picture is part of the duckface meme, while the second picture is a mixture of both. The first picture can also be viewed as being part of the remix culture, in which existing materials are combined to produce a new product. In our case, a picture of Abraham Lincoln has been merged with an iPhone to produce a vintage mirror-shot picture. Most of all, memes enable young people to be creative and deal with topics that concern their generation. A single meme is able to start a worldwide trend and, at the same time, able to end one. Subsequently following the memes, some *Facebook* users stopped using the duckface and mirror-shot poses in their profile pictures. While the innovators and early adaptors of the two poses may have

¹⁷ Picture 1: <<http://weheartit.com/entry/10315124#>>

Picture 2: <<http://iseeahappyface.com/mirror-phone-self-shot-duckface-cH9NZ8>>

Picture 3: <<http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/200428-duck-face>>

stopped using these, many *Facebook* users, presumably those who seem to simply follow a trend, are still producing and using the described profile pictures to a great extent.

In this chapter, I have tried to express my belief that *Facebook* makes its users create very identical identities. Particularly among teenagers, self-representation on social networking sites takes place according to “highly coded cultural conventions and social preferences” (Ziehe 1994: 2). As group membership and group identity are very important to young people, not only the profile pictures, but every post made by a teenager has to be in accordance with the tastes, attitudes and values of those who identify with the group. Most of the time, the profile picture of a teenager does not represent his or her real identity, but the one of his or her group. The pictures of the teenagers do not represent who they are, but who they want to be or even the person they think they ought to be. When the tastes of the group change, the tastes of the individual will change as well. On *Facebook*, tastes, and therefore, identities, become measurable and assessable. The more likes and comments a teenager gets on his or her profile picture, the more he or she will be assured that this is the right kind of picture. The next picture that this person is going post may be very similar to the picture that has previously been posted and liked by so many. By this means, the group dictates not only the tastes of the individual but also his or her identity.

The amount of likes and comments a person will receive always depends on the size of his or her audience. On *Facebook*, one’s audience can be made up of only a couple of people or of a few thousand. In the following chapter, I am going to explain how one’s *Facebook* audience develops and how this audience influences the identity performance of the individual.

2.3 Big Brother 2.0

Ito et al.'s research (2010) on social networks suggests that most teenagers on *Facebook* surround themselves with people they already know in real life. This means that their online peer networks can be perceived as a mere extension of the networks they maintain offline. *Facebook*, however, does not allow a public distinction between good friends and people who one might only know only by sight.

The real world differentiation between a good friend and a loose contact is that we only share our emotions, ideas, holiday pictures, etc. with those friends that we are very close to and trust to deal with any confidential information that we hand out. The amount of information that we are willing to reveal depends on the proximity that a person has in our life. The better we know a person, the more trust and willingness to open up is exuded. This degree exists on *Facebook*, but is only used sporadically by most people on the network.

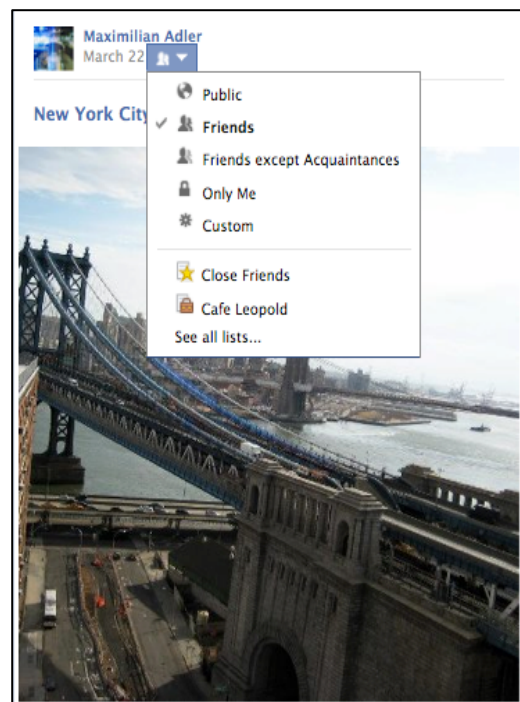


Figure 5. Audience selection on *Facebook*.

Figure 5 shows how *Facebook* enables its users to classify the content that they want to share with their network. The figure shows a picture that I have decided to upload to my profile. Before a person is going to share something, *Facebook* will give him or her the opportunity to choose the audience that will be able to view this post. Although this may seem like exemplary behavior from the side of *Facebook* when it comes to the protection of their user's privacy, some major points of criticism remain. First of all, *Facebook* only installed this feature after it was made popular on *Google+*, a rival network, and many *Facebook* users vigorously demanded its introduction to the Zuckerberg network. Second, *Facebook* has put the default setting of every users' posts on "public". This means that unless a user changes the setting of his or her post, the entire Internet will be able to view it. In figure 5, I've changed

the setting from “public” to “friends”, meaning only my friends are able to view this picture. The figure displays seven different privacy settings that a user may choose. Nevertheless, the problem is that the more settings there are, the greater confusion users will experience. Due to the complexity of the settings, many users have stopped changing them or have simply forgotten to do so. Others have never understood how they worked in first place. In the first chapter, I mentioned that *Facebook* slowly abolishes the walls that separate and protect the network from the rest of the Internet. Changing their privacy settings is one of its ways it does so. At regular intervals, *Facebook* changes its settings in order to improve their network. However, many of the changes confuse the user because they are difficult to understand and are hidden in subsections of the profile. When a user has finally gotten used to a change, he or she may have forgotten that a change has been made in the first place. Users may simply accept the changes that have been made without really questioning them and the changes that *Facebook* keeps installing on their network reduces users’ privacy more than they protect it.

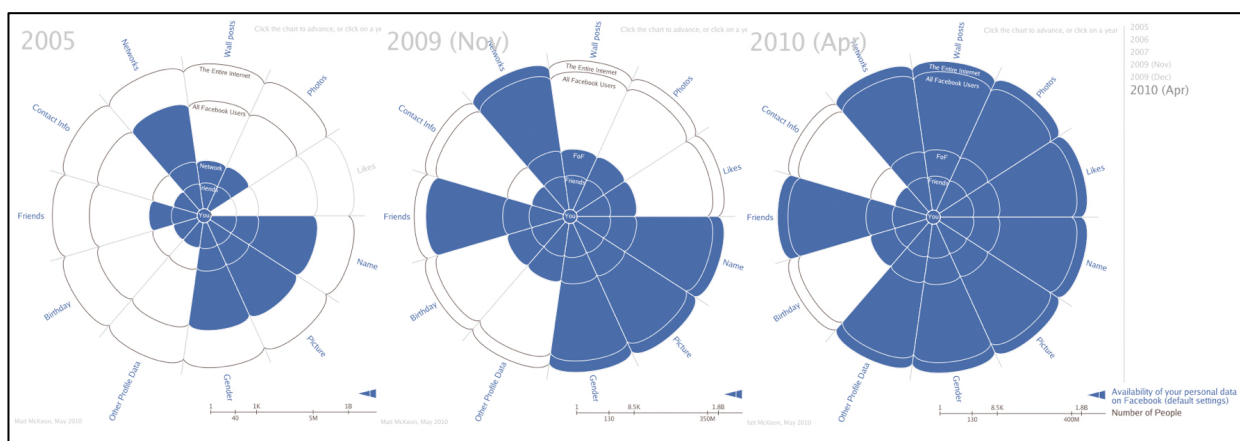


Figure 6. Changes in Facebook default profile settings from 2005 to 2010.¹⁸

Figure 6 shows how default profile settings on *Facebook* have changed between 2005 and 2010. In 2005, the only people who could view a user’s private information and posts were his or her friends (second circle from the center of the wheel) and the friends of their friends (third circle). Other *Facebook* users (fourth circle) could only see this person’s name, gender and profile picture. We have to bear in mind that we are talking about the default settings, that is, settings that can be changed and be made more protective if a person decides to do so. However, as I have already explained, most people are not aware of or too lazy to change these. Four years

¹⁸ <http://mattmckean.com/facebook-privacy/>

later, in 2009, the entire Internet (fifth circle) was able to access a user's name, gender and profile picture. Additionally, the default settings enabled not only a user's friends, but also their friends, to view all of the user's profile content. In 2010, *Facebook* decided to make more users' private data accessible to the entire Internet. The only information about a user still kept secure by default was his or her birthday and contact information (e-mail, mobile phone number, address). This setting allowed the entire Internet to look at a person's photo albums, wall posts, likes and profile data including his or her mobile phone number and home address. This demonstrates that *Facebook* has a greater interest in revealing private information about its users than securing it. Furthermore, this discloses that we are dealing with a highly public platform on which a user's audience has the possibility to reach substantial proportions of the population. Although it is possible to change these settings, its confusing design keeps a large amount of users from doing so.

After having established that the default audience of any *Facebook* user can be a rather substantial size, we are now going to look at the user's most proximate network, that is to say, his or her *Facebook* friends.

Boyd revealed that, in social networks, it is the social convention among American teenagers to accept friendship requests from any known peer, including his or her friends, acquaintances or classmates (2010: 86). Once added as a friend, everyone, by default, has the same possibilities to investigate one's online profile and access all of its information. As has been explained, the privacy settings of a person's *Facebook* profile are a crucial factor when it comes to the determination of the size of that person's audience. If a person allows his or her profile to be viewed by the general public, his or her audience will be partly anonymous, because not only one's friends but also the entire Internet will be able to view the content of that person's profile. The audience will be considerably smaller and known to the user if the access to this person's profile is limited to his or her real life friends. While the handling of security settings may be an insight into the introversion or extraversion of a user's personality (Estoisia, et al. 2009), it can also highlight the user's awareness of the potential risks that an open profile bears.

Once a person has narrowed his or her *Facebook* audience down, the question arises in which way the user's identity performance is presented to his or her audience. During the first years of the network, users had to visit a person's profile in

order to acquire information about him or her. Unless one would deliberately go to a person's profile to view the pictures or read his or her status updates, one would not be confronted with information about him or her. All of this changed in 2006 when *Facebook* established a function on its network called the "News Feed". The News Feed is the first page that a user encounters when he or she logs into the social network. It displays constantly updated interactions that take place between the user's friends. It shows when a friend updates his or her status, changes their profile picture, adds a new photo album, attends an event or is in a new romantic relationship. It tells you when a friend has posted a picture to another friend's wall or was tagged¹⁹ in a picture. In short, the News Feed informs a user about everything going on in his or her local *Facebook* network. On its blog, *Facebook* wrote:

*News Feed highlights what's happening in your social circles on Facebook. It updates a personalized list of news stories throughout the day, so you'll know when Mark adds Britney Spears to his Favorites or when your crush is single again. Now, whenever you log in, you'll get the latest headlines generated by the activity of your friends and social groups.*²⁰

By this means, information about a person no longer has to be investigated, but is forced upon the users. Suddenly, the individual is able to observe every step that his or her friends make on the network. This circumstance lets us draw connections to Bentham's *Panopticon*²¹ (Dalsgaard: 2008, Wiedemann: 2010). Although *Facebook*'s appearance is nothing like a *Panopticon* prison, by allowing permanent and conscious surveillance, it fulfills the main function of such a system. In his analysis of the *Panopticon*, Foucault explains that in order to be effective, the power of the wardens has to be perceptible but at the same time invisible (1994: 258). On *Facebook*, the News Feed enables those two functions. Due to the constant stream of information, users always have the feeling that they are being observed because they are in the position of the watchmen themselves. However, users only leave

¹⁹ To be tagged in a picture means that someone has taken a picture that includes a person and linked it to this person's profile.

²⁰ <https://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=2207967130>

²¹ In this prison design by Jeremy Bentham, consisting of a circular structure with a watchtower in the middle, the wardens are able to observe the prisoners without being seen.

traces of their actions on the News Feed if they communicate²² with other users. This means that users are able to influence their representation on the News Feed by deliberately adjusting the way they communicate with others. This kind of conduct will be thoroughly analyzed in the next chapter. At this point, it is just important to bear in mind that the News Feed has the power to influence how users represent themselves on the network.

In his research, Ginger has found out that the four most popular activities on *Facebook* are to 1) investigate profiles or pictures, 2) view the News Feed, 3) investigate groups or events and 4) investigate notes or posted items (56). This demonstrates that *Facebook* makes it conventional to observe the online activities of others. While the protest against the News Feed was considerable when the feature was first introduced, the function and all of the processes it includes have by now been willingly accepted. Wiedemann points out that *Facebook* users know they are being watched (97). This peer-to-peer monitoring²³, in which the roles of the participant and the observer merge, incites users to produce more content. This is explained by Bröckling, who writes that “the function of the observation by others can be found in the coercion for self-reflection, which on the other hand should bring an improved self-monitoring about” (2003: 85). This theory can be translated to *Facebook* in a way that users believe that they should post more status updates, photos, comments and likes in order to satisfy their own need for self-reflection as well as for identity performance. Teenagers struggle constantly with the stabilization of their own identity and constantly ask themselves who they are or who they want to be. On *Facebook*, they are enabled to create the perfect version of what they think is their identity. The more a person posts on the network and the more his or her peer group validates these posts, the more stable his or her identity becomes. *Facebook*, therefore, creates a behavior in which adolescents reveal large amounts of private information in order to figure out who they are.

This phenomenon is supported by the fact that only the most recent updates are represented in the News Feed. If a person wants to be noticed by his or her own audience, he or she is forced to constantly perform his or her online identity by posting textual or visual profile updates or by communicating with other users.

²² A person is only represented on the News Feed if he or she comments on posts, likes another person’s post or posts something him or herself.

²³ A term coined by Andrejevic (2005: 488)

Obviously, this process of self-reflection and the subsequent posting of updates are always accompanied by the questions of “*Who am I?*”, “*Who do I want to be?*” and “*How do I represent myself to achieve this goal?*”.

This chapter’s primary focus was to show that *Facebook* is a highly public platform and users consciously think about how they are going to represent themselves. At this point, some may note that it does not seem that many adolescents think before they post something. However, we have to bear in mind that what makes a representation good and beneficial to a person is always relative. The identity performance of an adult on *Facebook* often differs dramatically from that of an adolescent. The interests, goals and audiences of both groups are simply too different. Teenagers work out between themselves what is cool and conducive to their performance, very often representing their identities in a way that seems inappropriate to many adults. The *Digital Generation* is not afraid of revealing private information in a public context. While most adults are more careful and reluctant when it comes to posting private data, members of the *Digital Generation* do not seem to share these anxieties. In a way, *Facebook* encourages this mass of private data provided by the *Digital Generation*. While in reality, their identities may be subject to uncontrollable changes, adolescents’ online identities can be constructed on a solid foundation. Nevertheless, their *Facebook* identities are more likely to resemble a collective identity than an individual one. The ever-watching eye of the News Feed makes insecure users perform well-established identities, while neglecting those identities that differ from the tastes and values of the group.

Previously I have explained how the audience influences the identity performance of the individual. In the next chapter, I will analyze how the individual turns the tables and incorporates the audience into his or her own identity performance. In order to understand this process, I will scrutinize the most influential element of a user’s profile – his or her friend list.

2.4 Performing Friendships

According to data provided by *Facebook*²⁴, the average user has 190 friends in the network. While 50% of all *Facebook* users have less than 100 friends, most adolescents have far more than that. It has already been noted that most teenagers add peers from their greater social surroundings to their friend lists, which may include their best friends, friends, schoolmates, acquaintances or somebody they just know by sight. Nevertheless, while a total of 190 friends may seem like a credible amount of contacts, some teenagers seem to know half of the city they live in.

For the purpose of an experiment, I sent ten friendship requests to random adolescents on Facebook. Without knowing me in real life or asking who I was, three of the ten added me as their *Facebook* friend. All three had more than a thousand contacts in their network. With the help of this experiment, I discovered the phenomenon widely known as “*friend collecting*”. A person is said to be a friend collector if he or she randomly accepts or requests friendships in order to fill up his or her friend list on a social network. This kind of behavior enables a *Facebook* user to have as many as 5,000 contacts²⁵ on the network.



Figure 7. Friend Lists on *Facebook*.

²⁴ www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-data-team/anatomy-of-facebook/10150388519243859

²⁵ *Facebook* has limited the number of contacts to this specific amount. If a person wants to have more friends (or followers as it might be called at this proportions), he or she has to create a fan page. Owners of fan pages will receive likes instead of friend requests.

If a person has 1,000, 2,000 or even up to 5,000 friends on Facebook, especially if this person is only 14 or 15 years old, one starts to question if this person really knows all of his or her contacts. After investigating a large number of *Facebook* profiles from my local network, I came to the conclusion that the older a *Facebook* user is, the less contacts he or she will have. While the age cohort of my parents (55 to 65 years old) had an average of about 100 contacts, my age cohort (25 – 35 years old) had an average of about 300 contacts. The great majority of adolescents that I looked at had more than 400 *Facebook* friends.

Figure 7 shows several *Facebook* profiles that have incredibly large friend lists. Two of the profiles even have friend lists close to the absolute limit of 5,000 contacts. In these cases, the online social network of a person does not even closely resemble that person's offline social network. The majority of the people in these friend lists have not been added for communication purposes but to function as a tool for the user's very own identity performance. Boyd explains that many teenagers believe that the more friends they have, the more popular they seem to others (86). Livingston supports this notion by explaining that within social networks young people develop a sense of identity through the connections they have (2008: 9).

A large number of *Facebook* friends might result in a very high number of likes, comments and attention that a user will receive. A *Facebook* "like", as the name implies, conveys the idea that the creator of the post is also liked and viewed as being popular. For adolescents, likes are a major source of increasing their self-assurance, identity consolidation and tell a teenager if he or she is popular or not. To most people, receiving 300 likes is far more stimulating to their self-confidence than receiving ten likes. However, users have to decide if they want to sell out their privacy in order to gain attention and popularity or if they only invite their real friends to their profiles. For many teenagers, this is a difficult decision. On one hand, they want to be popular among their peers; on the other hand, many adolescents are aware that the security of one's privacy is very important on the Internet.

In the previous section, I explained that some adolescents artificially enhance their friend list in order to generate a sufficient hype about their own profile. While only a few users will have gigantic friend lists like those in figure 7, a great number of users will not hesitate to invite a few people they only know by sight and create friend

lists with more than 400 contacts. Having a small number of contacts on *Facebook* is not viewed as something positive and popular. This kind of peer pressure is amplified by the design of the *Facebook* profile. As figure 7 shows, the number of one's friends is displayed on the top portion of the profile. Therefore, the first two things that the audience will learn about a person's identity are how he or she looks (profile picture) and how many friends he or she has. This means that one's connections are an even more prominent tool of one's identity performance than the written profile, which is hidden in a clickable subsection of the profile.

To truly understand this need to connect with others and to present and perform these connections, I want to refer to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of "social capital". Bourdieu describes social capital as a resource that is generated when people are part of a social network and have the possibility to interact with various people. As Bourdieu puts it: "The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent (...) depends on the size of the network of connections that can effectively be mobilized" (1986: 249). Teenagers' behavior on *Facebook* supports this theory and draws attention to the importance of social capital in the lives of adolescents.

While many teenagers use their friend lists to negotiate their own status and popularity, *Facebook* friends are also needed to generate attention and affirmation. Whenever a new picture, status update or music video is posted to a profile, it has to be liked by friends in order to be validated as socially legitimate. This behavior is called a "dramaturgical cooperation" by Westlake, in which the *Facebook* friends work as a team in order to certify each other's performances and to "define the local *Facebook* community" (2008: 27). The cooperation between *Facebook* friends in a local community is a very crucial factor to a person's identity performance. For many adolescents it would be inconceivable and embarrassing if one of their posts was not liked or commented on within a half a day or even a few hours. Not receiving any reaction to a post would mean that a person's post is insignificant and, what is more, the creator of the post is insignificant. Many adolescents simply use *Facebook* to obtain daily likes and comments. Very often, a person can only feel pleased if he or she receives a satisfying amount of likes, at best more than anybody else in the friend network. For this very reason, young girls sometimes work in teams to like and

comment on each other's posts, a behavior that is only a small aspect of a much larger phenomenon.



Figure 8. Wall communication of BFFs.

For a few years now, researchers have been observing a trend in which teenage girls celebrate their friendships like passionate romances. On *Facebook*, these girls have found a platform where they are able to stage these friendships to their best friends, or as they like to call it, BFFs²⁶. German linguist Martin Voigt explains the phenomenon that some girls have started to publicly tell each other that they loved one another and that they publicly declared that they were “in a relationship”²⁷ with each other (*DER SPIEGEL* 42/12; 132). Voigt points out that the emergence of this behavior strongly correlates with the evolution of social networks. Before social networks became popular, friendships were performed on a smaller scale. Girls could boast about their friendships on the schoolyard at the utmost. Nobody could see the text messages they were sending back and forth and hear the long conversations they had on the telephone.

The social networks changed all of this and the celebration of the friendships went public. Suddenly every exchange of words and every picture could be seen not only

²⁶ *Best Friends Forever*

²⁷ On *Facebook*, users are able to be in a relationship with any person they choose. The relationship status, as well as the people in a relationship, is then made public to one's *Facebook* community.

by the whole class, but also by hundreds of other *Facebook* friends. Researchers have revealed that, often, the most popular girls in a class will demonstrate how to use such an audience. These girls will establish conduct to celebrate and romanticize their love to the BFFs. Voigt mentions that such a staging demands hard work from the adolescent girls. They have “to do public relations work” in order to be friends with a halfway popular girl (133). The BFF always has to be the first to comment on a picture and always has to find the most passionate words to describe the love between the two girls. If a girl does not meet the demands of a BFF, there will be gossip and possibly malice within the peer group. Figure 8 depicts an example of such a BFF relationship.

The interaction between the two girls is displayed on Janine’s profile and visible to her whole *Facebook* network. Both girls use very passionate and youth-specific language, for example, with the word “shhzziiii”, we are able to witness another modification of the word “Schatz”. In this case, the girls express their own individuality as well as the individuality of their friendship. Both girls are using very emotionally charged and completely exaggerated language, always repeating how much they love each other (ild, ildüa or ildsvuüa²⁸) and how they are the best things in each other’s lives. It is also very important for the girls to put as many hearts (<3) as possible in their text. Voigt explains that the heart has turned into the symbol of the BFF movement (133). Other important linguistic elements would be switching g and q (as in “danqqe das es dich qibd”) or stretching vowel sounds (as in “shhzziii”, “liieb”, “mausiiis”, or “süüüüß”). Voigt points out that, by stretching the vowels, the girls imitate how they are talking to each other in real life, that is, with a high and childlike voice.

In a networked setting such as *Facebook*, everybody is constantly copying certain popular linguistic features, poses and styles. By this means, an attractive idea is quickly turned into common property. While some people may decide to exchange the g with a q, others might only write like this: “I LoVE yoU sO mUch AnD yOU aRE THE Best tHInG iN mY Life”. Trends come and go on the Internet in the blink of an eye and in social networks they are often set by people who are also popular offline (Voigt 134). The rest of the *Facebook* community has to be attentive and try to copy

²⁸ ild, ildüa and ildsvuüa are both acronyms for the German sentences „Ich liebe dich“, „Ich liebe dich über alles“ and „Ich liebe dich so viel und über alles“ (I love you more than anything).

the most popular trends and styles. Although everybody is trying to express his or her individuality, this behavior lead to a general, collective identity.

This phenomenon of publicly celebrating one's relationship to their best friend as a love affair is very girl-specific. Most boys reject this behavior, partly because they fear that they would be viewed as homosexuals. However, many boys profess their relationship to their girlfriend or clique. This conduct, as seen in figure 9, is used to exhibit being a part of something, may it be a group of friends or romantic relationship. In particular, adolescents have a great need for social affiliation and are therefore very anxious about displaying this to their friends. The feeling of belonging with others does not only stabilize the identities of the adolescents, but is also a source for developing identity. The more affiliations a person has, the greater the person's social capital and the higher their status in the friend network. Posts like ones figure 9 have two primary impacts on the performer and his or her audience.

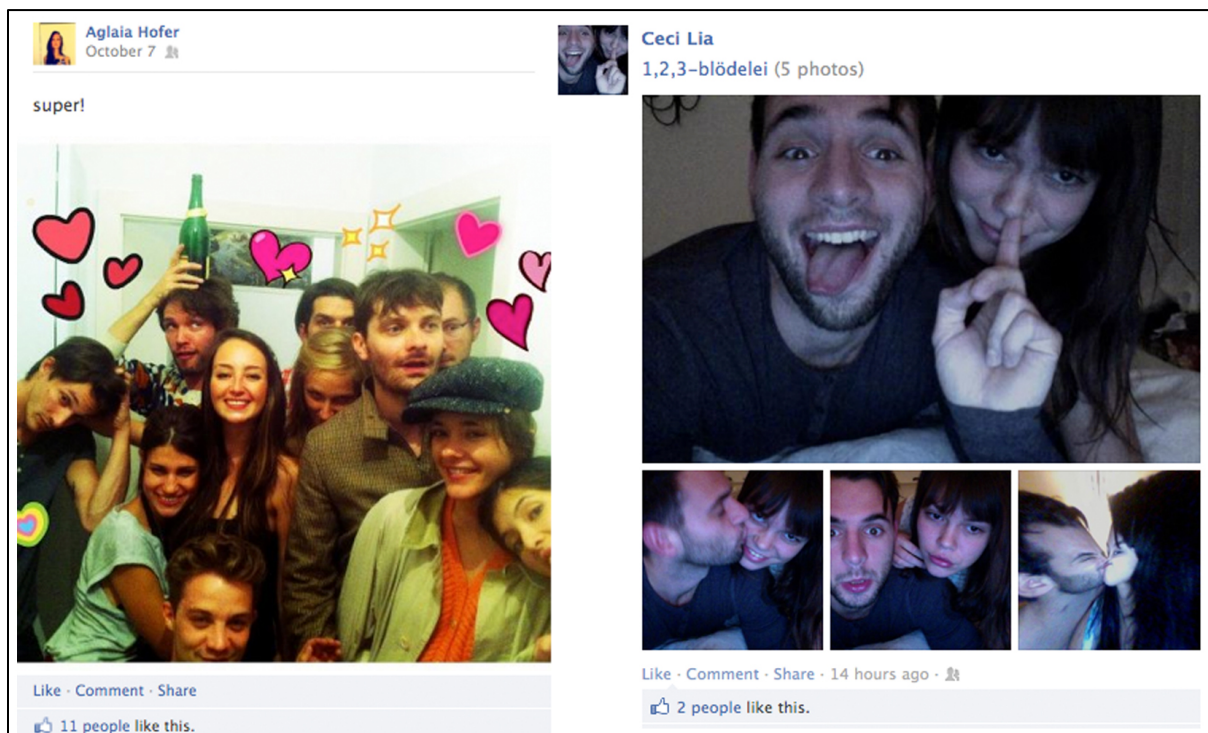


Figure 9. Performing friendships and relationships on *Facebook*.

On the one hand, these posts and the likes they receive give the creator self-confidence and affirmation about his or her place in the peer group and society in general. On the other hand, posts like these may weaken the self-assurance of those people not in the picture. Many people are not in a romantic relationship or lack such a large and performative friend group. Posts like those in figure 8 and figure 9 will

always remind those people of what they do not have, meaning *Facebook* not only has the ability to boost a person's confidence but also to increase another person's insecurities and self-doubt at the same time.

In this chapter, I explained the role that one's friends play in the performance of one's *Facebook* identity. The main idea of *Facebook* is for a person to stay in contact with those close to him or her. However, while most users primarily chat, laugh and hang out with their friends on the network, they also tend to use friends as a tool for their own identity performance. Friends are needed to acknowledge a person's popularity and status within a peer group. The greater a person's social capital is and the more friends that like his or her posts, the greater the confidence in the own identity will be. Furthermore, friendships are used to show belonging through publicly picturing happy relationships. While such posts have the ability to strengthen the identity of a user, they might weaken the identity of another.

Popularity might not only be gained by displaying one's connections, but also by a person's insight into popular culture. Before social networks, adolescents tended to impress others with the newest fashion, gadgets and music they heard. On *Facebook*, there are many more possibilities to do so. In the next chapter, I will analyze how teenagers use their *Facebook* "walls" to influence the way they are perceived by their peers. I will explain how Facebook enables many adolescents to advertise their own identity and constantly try to create a stylish and up-to-date product.

2.5 The Wall, A Marketplace for Attention and Popularity

The “wall” is a space on the *Facebook* profile where users are able to post status updates, videos, music or pictures. The wall shows every post that a user has ever made from the moment he or she joined the network to the present day. About a year ago, *Facebook* installed a new feature called “Timeline”. The idea behind Timeline is that users should post even more content in order to tell their life story with pictures and status updates. The installation of this new feature was met with great concerns, primarily because it would make users even more transparent. Timeline allows people to, by selecting a particular year or month, investigate other users’ profiles with even greater thoroughness. Suddenly people were able to easily see what Marc posted in October 2006, or what Sandra looked like in May 2007.

Many *Facebook* users, but especially adolescents, use the wall to learn about and exchange social norms, tastes and knowledge within the environment of their peers. In a way, the wall is a modern version of a public toilet stall. For example, one person will scribble something meaningless on the stall, another person will write an even more meaningless reply, a third person will draw a picture and a fourth person will mention the date when he or she was here. Subsequently, the whole public is “forced” to observe this communicative exchange. I am not implying that this is something negative; rather, it should be perceived as a new and different form of interpersonal interaction. *Facebook* helped to create an unprecedented, new and fascinating form of human communication. The social network facilitates communication based on creating attention and constant evaluation. People want to be positively perceived by others and tend to adapt their communication in order to achieve this goal. Users usually recognize that they are interacting in a highly public forum. Before posting content on a wall, most users will ask themselves: “Will my audience like this?” or “Does this post reflect the person that I want to be?”.

In the following analysis, I am going to point out the three main performative functions of the wall.

First, a person may use their wall to update his or her status by posting what is going on in their life at the moment. Most people provide information about what they are presently doing (e.g., “just finished homework”), how they feel (e.g., “I’m so

tired”), where they are (e.g., “@Starbucks Mariahilferstrasse with Julie and Marc”), state their opinion on current events (e.g., “Obama Rulez!”) or post statements about their emotions (e.g., “I’m so in love”, “I hate my life/parents/school”, “Life is beautiful”). Subsequently, the status updates of a user’s entire friend network are gathered and presented in the News Feed. Statuses help adolescents communicate with a large amount of friends by telling them what is happening. Instead of chatting with each friend individually, the status update informs one’s whole social network. The frequency that adolescents post status updates may show how strong of a desire they have to advise their friends of their own existence. They want to be recognized as being part of their peer group, so the more a person posts on *Facebook*, the more visible he or she will become to the center of his or her friend network.

Second, users are able to upload pictures or videos onto their walls, many of which contain popular culture references²⁹ and are used by adolescents as a “token of identity, taste, and style to understand and display who they are in relation to their peers” (Boyd 2010: 43). In other words, *Facebook* users often take cultural cues produced by others to represent their own idealized identities. With every text or video posted on his or her wall, a user creates their identity.

At this point, I would like to revisit the idea that a *Facebook* profile can be compared to a brand or product that aims to be sold. Users, just like big companies, try to charge their product with a certain image. For example, Nike, a worldwide sporting goods supplier, had to battle with a large amount of bad press³⁰ in the past; nowadays, however, the brand’s current reputation among its clientele has improved. To achieve this, Nike and countless other companies use images and reputations of others (movie stars, athletes, famous musicians) and turn it into their own. Therefore, whenever an adolescent sees a product by *Nike*, they may think about LeBron James’s coolness, Roger Federer’s accuracy or David Beckham’s handsomeness. To a certain extent, *Facebook* wall posts work in the same manner.

When a teenage boy posts a music video by or picture of rapper 50 Cent on his wall, the boy wants to influence his audience to associate him and his personality with this cultural icon and what he represents. In real life, the same boy might

²⁹ Adolescents often share their favorite music, movies, images or games on their walls.

³⁰ Nike was accused of hiring child laborers.

accomplish a similar effect by wearing baggy pants, a long t-shirt and baseball cap in an effort to copy 50 Cent's style. In addition to the video, the boy might write a status update using African American rap slang or lyrics from a rap song. Such a performance is an important way for teenagers to negotiate their own identity, popularity and status. The kinds of posts a user presents on their wall will often strongly correlate with the tastes and values of his or her peer group. Although teenagers will post text that, to some extent, reflects their own individual tastes, these usually will be in accordance with the tastes of the group. During adolescence, adhering to collective values and tastes of the peer group can generate a sense of conformity and belonging. These bonding experiences are highly treasured because they provide security about one's own identity and existence. Such assimilation processes are most salient in teenager fashion. As adolescents in a clique might all decide to wear the same brand of sneakers or jeans, there is a hidden, collective understanding of which music or pictures should be posted on *Facebook*. There is a certain code of coolness among teenagers; nevertheless, this code may be interpreted in different manners. While some boys and girls may decide to post music videos by Theophilus London³¹ and wear skinny jeans and nerd glasses, others may prefer the 50 Cent's style. At the end, what is important is that a youth's identity performance is perceived as being authentic and appropriate to his or her peers. As long as the performer is convinced by his or her own act and the audience takes the actor seriously, there will be no doubt about the realness of the identity that is being staged (Goffman 28). Therefore, teenagers are able to deliberately construct their idealized online identities one step at a time, or, one wall post after another.

The last function of one's wall is for friends to post messages, videos, pictures or music on it. To understand how teenagers act out their friendship on *Facebook*, we will have to analyze one specific function within the network that gives friends an outstanding possibility to do so.

By clicking on the "see friendship" button, every user is able to view the entire wall-to-wall communication that has taken place between two of his or her mutual friends. Boyd explains that, for many teenagers, the main reason for posting something on a friend's wall is not that of mere communication but rather that of performance (2010: 96). In the previous chapter, I mentioned that an individual

³¹ Theophilus London is a member of a new generation of US American rappers. The lyrics of these musicians are much more eloquent and sophisticated than those of the typical gangster rappers.

Facebook user can have up to 5,000 friends on the network. However, these friends mean nothing with respect to his or her status in the peer group if there is no interaction on this person's wall. Without communication, the people in this person's peer network will quickly understand that the masses of friends are simply a performative veneer that fades every passing day without a wall post. Therefore, one of the main reasons for a teenager to post or comment on a friend's wall is the hope that they will receive a comment back in return. This behavior is reflected in Figure 8, in which two BFFs interact with each other. Although the communication between the two girls is repetitive and lacking much outwardly relevant meaning, the process of the interaction is still very significant to the status of both girls. Frequent communication on a user's *wall* means that a person has many friends and is popular, whereby the quantity of the interaction outranks the quality by far. Derrick, a teenager from Brooklyn interviewed by Christo Sims (Ito et al.: 96), illustrates how this form of performance seems to work:

That's how they talk to each other, though. They just want to let people know that people talk to them. So if you go to their page you see that they got a lot of comments. That makes them feel like they're popular, that they're getting comments all the time by different people, even people that they don't know. So it makes them feel popular in a way.

This shows that many teenagers use communication as a tool to improve their online representation, a process that, again, is a way of idealizing one's identity.

By viewing interaction between teenagers from this perspective, we are able to detect that friendship is not only used to create identity but, even more notable, that attention and affirmation become measurable. Like an actor in the real world, the *Facebook* performer receives a reward for his or her effort. While an actor is compensated with money or awards, the currency on *Facebook* is the like. A like is gained by posting an especially clever status update, cool picture or video. With likes, friends acknowledge that a user's post has been a good choice and attribute recognition as well as social capital. The more likes one is able to earn with a performance, the stronger the feeling of representing the "right" identity will be. For teenagers who are only starting to explore their identities and find their place in

society, likes can become serious business and strongly influence their identity formation. Figure 10, the *Facebook* status update of a teenager girl, shows this:



Figure 10. Fishing for likes.³²

This screenshot perfectly exemplifies the connection between likes and identity confirmation. Since most teenagers are rather insecure and anxious about their own identities, likes help them with stability. Buckingham explains this course of action by saying “identity is developed by the individual, but it has to be recognized and confirmed by others”. Although this kind of behavior can be applied to the identity formation of most people, it is especially strong among adolescents who are still very insecure about their own identities. When a person’s identity becomes more grounded, it will be influenced less by the opinion of others.

In this chapter, I have explained how the wall is used as a tool to perform and idealize the identities of *Facebook* users. At the beginning of the identity creation process stands the question of who a user is in relation to his or her peers. Subsequently, a user will write status updates and post cultural references to fill his or her respective *Facebook* identity with meaning. A large part of one’s *Facebook* identity is constructed with the help of images, ideas and accomplishments that have been produced by others. Furthermore, *Facebook* likes steer users’ identity constructions in the same direction, forcing the creation of collective. On the one hand, this gives adolescents a sense of belonging; on the other, this keeps many unconventional identities hidden and unexplored. Figure 10 demonstrates how important the opinion of *Facebook* friends is to many young users. In the social

³²http://static.fjcdn.com/pictures/Attention+Whore+lvl+100.+Saw+this+on+my+timeline....+how_f5d5a6_3120093.jpg

network, friends validate a person's identity and indirectly tell a user which identity he or she should choose.

The wall seems to have also unlocked a new kind of behavior and need that drives many users on the social network. *Facebook* has created the urge within people to constantly share what is going on in their lives. Every thought, every picture – even every trip to the dentist – has to be shared with others. It would seem that to the *Digital Generation*, thoughts and actions only become relevant if they are shared.

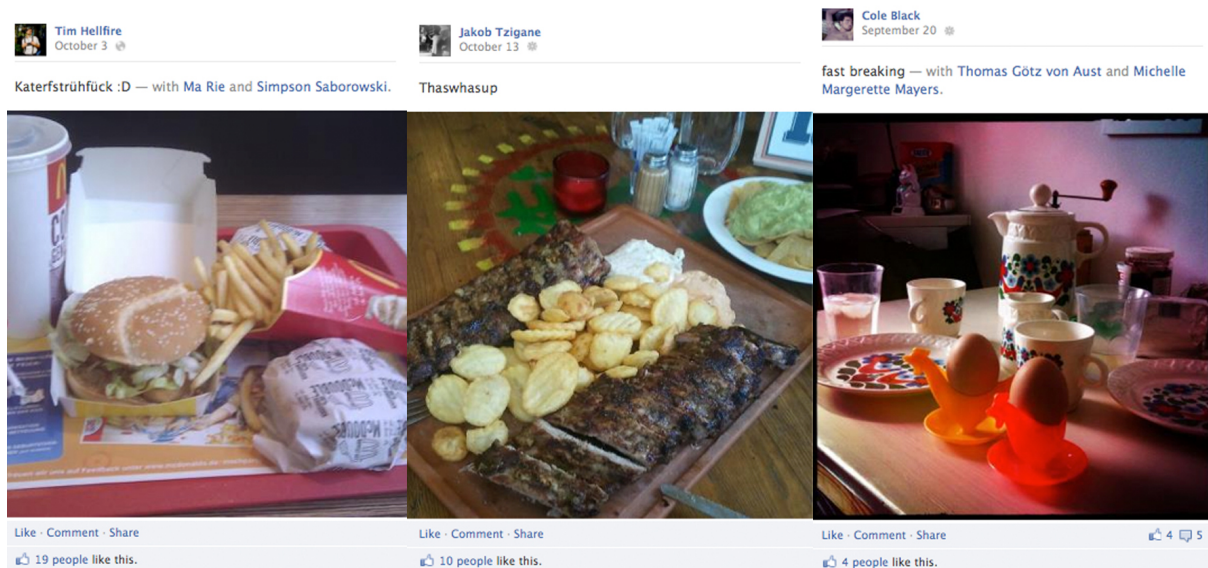


Figure 11. Sharing pictures of food on *Facebook*.

In figure 11, we can see that even before the first bite of the burger, the first fry is eaten or the first coffee is poured, *Facebook* users take pictures of their food and share it with their community. This may indicate that a person's identity is only relevant and able to be experienced if aspects of this identity are constantly shared with others. While some people's urge to share is not so pronounced and they just post from time to time, other users seem to be downright addicted to constantly sharing new content.

Aspects of this exaggerated form of identity performance will be analyzed in the next chapter. I believe that after having established how adolescents use social networks in order to boost each other's self-confidence, it is now time to analyze this behavior from a different perspective. While flattery, attention and affirmation are important to stabilize one's identity, to some people, *Facebook* seems to be the only source for their identity construction. I am going to address a phenomenon that has emerged from the obsession of self-image and the permanent need to be the center of attention.

2.6 The *Facebook* “Whore”

Facebook is unquestionably an excellent platform to stay in touch with one’s friends and share content with them. It has never been so easy to hang out, joke around, flirt and get together with so many people at the same time. However, the social network can also have its dark side. One aspect is the obsession over self-image and the exaggerated allocation of meaning to one’s friendships to strangers. Everybody can be a star on *Facebook* if he or she has the looks, status or willingness to reveal as much as possible about his or her private identity.

What if I started an online meeting place where all are equal and I am the undisputed center?

- Lisa Simpson³³

As Lisa points out, on *Facebook* everybody is equal, but from the perspective of the user, he or she is the center of attention. The very design of the network can easily catapult the self-performance of a teenager out of proportion. The prominent and shining profile pictures, *Facebook* registering identity files of its users like a model agency and the omnipresent influence of likes seem to blind many. In the following section, I am going to look at how the perfection of a user’s self-image can get out of hand and lead to a serious identity crisis, a phenomenon that is more prominent within the *Digital Generation* than any previous generation.

In figure 10, we looked at a teenage girl who created a status update in order to generate likes, attention and confirmation. This behavior is common on *Facebook*, especially among teenage girls, and its ridicule can be observed on various webpages (e.g. failbook.failblog.com, 9gag.com), that have coined the term *Facebook* “whore”. While seeking attention is not an unusual behavior among teenagers who often expressing insecurities about identity, popularity and friendship (Ito et al. 92), its public performance make it more perceptible and obvious.

UrbanDictionary.com, a website that allows users to share slang, defines *Facebook* whores³⁴ as people who spend an excessive amount of time on the

³³ In an episode of the Simpson (“*The D’oh-cial Network*”, Season 23, Episode 11) Lisa creates a social network to make new friends.

network, constantly add strangers as new friends, regularly upload pictures that only show them in glamorous poses, never stop updating their status and who have long conversations on their walls instead of the *Facebook* chat application.³⁵ It is important to understand that a *Facebook* whore can be female or male and is not particularly charged with any sexual meaning. In a way, *Facebook* whores are addicted to the attention generated by adding random friends, as well as collecting likes and comments. Although boys and girls can be labeled as *Facebook* whores, a visit to the previously mentioned webpages³⁶ will create the feeling that girls are more privy to the term than boys. During their adolescence, as Spinney points out, “girls experience a greater decline in self-esteem than boys” (2012: 44) and this might be a way girls handle this problem. While negotiating identity, popularity and status within a peer groups is quite normal behavior, *Facebook* whores also seem to have narcissistic tendencies, valuing any kind of attention from any kind of audience over true friendship and affection.

The connection between the *Facebook* whore and the narcissist has been documented by Buffardi and Campbell, who discovered that many people use *Facebook* to meet their narcissistic needs (2008). They revealed that if a person has narcissistic tendencies in the real world, he or she was likely to express those in the virtual world. Buffardi and Campbell used the number of Facebook friends as well as the amount and the content of wall posts, among other variables, to determine if someone had narcissistic features.

While a healthy self-esteem can be viewed as a desirable character trait, more and more researchers have started to claim that today’s teenagers have an “overinflated opinion of themselves” (Spinney 44). Studies conducted in the United States have led researchers to also call the *Digital Generation*, “*Generation Me*” (Twenge 2006, Kelley 2009). *Generation Me*, as Twenge explains, values the importance of individualism more than anything else. She clarifies that, unlike the *Baby Boomers*³⁷, who only started to focus on individualism in their adult years, “*Generation Me* takes this attitude for granted and always has” (24). A study

³⁴ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=facebook%20whore>

³⁵ The Facebook chat program is used by two or more users to privately communicate with each other. Communication that takes place in the chat will not show up in the news feed.

³⁶ failbook.failblog.com, 9gag.com

³⁷ People born between 1955 and 1965 belong to the *Baby Boom Generation*.

conducted by Bushman, Moeller and Crocker that featured a large group of American college students reveals that many students are more interested in having their self-esteem increased (e.g., a higher grade or compliment) than receiving any other desirable reward (favorite food, sexual activity, money, alcohol or seeing a best friend) (2011: 997). According to experts, the cause for this need for self-affirmation can be found in changing educational methods (Twenge: 37), the increasing cult of celebrity (Spinney: 47) and the importance of the Internet.

Particularly in the United States, Twenge argues, parents started to focus on raising their children's self-esteem beginning in the 1970s. At home, school or church, children were constantly told that they were unique individuals who can do and become anything that they want. This behavior, according to Spinney, is based on studies that prove the connection between high self-esteem and positive life events (47). Nevertheless, the question arises about if this kind of upbringing has led members of today's generation to have a greater tendency to develop narcissistic characteristics. It can be argued that although this constant confirmation about one's uniqueness might have planted the seeds of self-obsession in the minds of today's children, it was not given the possibility to flourish until a few years ago. It was not until *Facebook* and other social networks evolved that people started to publicly act out their vanity in such numbers.

While Twenge and Spinney blame the parents and the exaggerated celebrity idealization for the increasing self-obsession of today's generation, I want to argue that some current television programs accelerate the vain behavior of many teenagers.

Among popular TV shows, teenage casting shows are one of the most watched programs among adolescents. For a couple of years, numerous formats such as *Idol*³⁸ or *Top Model*³⁹ have influenced teenagers to think that a person can only be important and liked when he or she is famous. Most casting shows treat the participating teenagers like interchangeable commodities, inconsiderately revealing their shortcomings and exposing them in front of the audience. Although the candidates are aware that only the winner will receive short-lived admiration and

³⁸ A talent search television series that is being produced in 181 countries (e.g. *Deutschland sucht den Superstar*, *American Idol*, etc.)

³⁹ A fashion-themed reality television show that is being produced in 143 countries (e.g. *Austria's Next Topmodel*, *Caribbean's Next Topmodel*)

fame, participation numbers have skyrocketed in recent years. I believe that this behavior reflects, to a certain extent, the exhibitionistic and rather vain nature of some members of today's generation.

The belief that everybody can become famous, as well as the ordinariness of public performance, have made many teenagers on *Facebook* act like they were music stars or contestants of a casting show themselves. It is important to understand that those shows often try to ridicule the participants and make the audience feel superior to them. If a teenage girl feels as beautiful or even more beautiful than many of the contestants of a *Topmodel* show, she may post pictures of herself on *Facebook* to prove this. The difference between the contestants of the television shows and *Facebook* users is that the jury on *Facebook* will never criticize the performers. When analyzing the comments on pictures that have been posted on *Facebook*, it becomes evident that most comments affirm and flatter the performer rather than mention negative things about him or her.



Figure 12. Fishing for compliments.⁴⁰

Figure 12 may be viewed as an example of a “bad”⁴¹ and vain picture that receives solely positive feedback. It can be assumed that the girl in the picture is part of a peer group that ridicules the duckface based on the title she chooses for her picture: “Worst face. ever.”. The title shows that she is aware that her *Facebook* community dislikes this specific facial expression. By using irony, the girl justifies her use of the despised grimace. In the end, this picture has it all – voluminous lips, big eyes with carefully applied make up and perfect hair that boldly reveals her flawless neck. The girl in the picture looks lovely; she knows she does. The comments that

⁴⁰ Facebook.com

⁴¹ People who mock the duckface might consider this picture as being bad.

she receives in return are definitely worth her trouble. All she needed was a picture in which she looked attractive, a little rhetorical finesse and a dedicated friend network. What she got in return were 27 likes and seven overwhelming comments.

By analyzing the comments she received on her picture, we are able to confirm what has already been established in a previous chapter. Users on *Facebook* comment with rather short and unsubstantial sentences, similar to text messages. However, what can also be noticed is the way her friends copy the commenting style of any casting show jury. The comments of her friends are evaluative and laudatory. Their style of interaction resembles the way a casting show jury would treat that candidate who was chosen to be the competition winner. On *Facebook*, everybody who looks good and has a cooperating friend network can feel like a winner. To retain popularity and continue to feel good about themselves, many adolescent *Facebook* users continue to post pretty pictures of themselves.

Eventually, casting shows participants as well as *Facebook* whores have to realize that they have been building castles in the sky. Compliments and likes have pushed their egos into spheres that are in no way in accordance with their abilities. On television, when the show is over and the spotlight has moved on, those who have enjoyed their 15 minutes of fame will be left in the shadows of their own dreams and hopes. On *Facebook*, this realization process can take somewhat longer, but someday everybody will realize that looks are not everything. To analyze this dilemma, I will use the words of rapper Lil' Wayne⁴²:

*But now the prom queen,
the prom queen is crying,
sitting outside of my door.
See, you never know how,
how everything could turn around*

*They loved her fancy underwear,
every boyfriend, every year.
She tried to keep 'em entertained
when they can hardly remember her name*

⁴² Dwayne Michael Carter, better known as Lil Wayne, can be considered as one the most influential US American rappers of his time. With 109 songs, Carter has passed Elvis Presley as the musician with the most entries on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. He may be considered as one of the main voices of this generation. The lyrics quoted have been taken from Carter's song "*Prom Queen*", which was released in 2009.

*She did everything she could,
just to make them love and treat her good.
She'd find herself alone
Asking herself where did she go wrong.*

Carter addresses the issue that it is always precarious to orientate one's own behavior on the attention and devotion of others. The *Facebook* whore, just like the prom queen in the song, has an ultimate goal of getting likes and positive comments and being in the spotlight. However, it is truly fatal to assume that every positive comment and attempt at flattery made on one's *Facebook* post is thoroughly genuine. As Carter points out, many boys only tell a girl how beautiful she is because they want something from her. Few things in this world are done without expecting a return service. Girls flatter the popular and pretty girl because they are hoping for a *like* or a comment in return. They want to be connected with the shining light of the prom queen and enhance their own identity performance.

The *Facebook* whore truly has to work for fame, attention and love. Just like the casting show performer, he or she has to step into the spotlight and make an exhibition of him or herself. Eventually, the devotion of the followers will vanish and one has to realize that there is not much left to support the identity that has been pushed to such amazing heights. This, of course, may lead to a serious identity crisis as, suddenly, an adolescent has to deal with the realization that he or she is not the idealized version of the self that has been created. This person will have to accept that he or she cannot live up to the standards that have been established.

In this chapter, I analyzed how *Facebook* offers many possibilities for teenagers to idealize their digital representation. In a way, the social network seems to be the vent for self-performative needs of many teenagers. I've shown how this generation can distinguish itself not only by its interest and abilities in the digital realm, but also by its individualism, exhibitionism and narcissistic tendencies. Experts believe that this behavior can be traced back to parents who focused on positive self-esteem reinforcement, over-exaggerated idealization of celebrities, as well as the Internet and television. With the possibility to post pictures, videos and status updates while simultaneously receiving attention and positive feedback for this "public display of taste and identity" (Ito et al. 87), *Facebook* has created a platform where teenagers are more likely to create a brand than an identity. When taking

celebrities and casting shows contestants as criteria, many adolescents seem to lose themselves within a world that only values attention, likes and affirmation. The creation of an idealized version of one's self offers people the possibility to explore certain aspects that one would not be able to experience in the offline world. Nevertheless, it can also lead to a severe identity crisis. Spinney points out that an increasing number of therapists in the United States are seeing a new generation of patients that are depressed because they are not able to live up to standards they have created for themselves within their online worlds (45).

2.7 Discussing *Facebook Identity*

In the previous six chapters, I introduced a very popular and powerful social network and discussed several processes that occur on this network. My primary intention was to draw attention to a very specific identity, which *Facebook* enables its users to carve out, their *Facebook* identity.

Although this identity is a virtual one, it is still connected to the offline identities of users. Users are represented by their real names and pictures as well as connected to their real life friends. The *Facebook* identity is singular; that is, it cannot be adjusted to the respective audiences of the performer. Although most adolescents have heterogeneous *Facebook* audiences (diverse friend networks including parents, teachers, etc.), their identities stay uniform. The *Facebook* identity is an idealized one where users omit negative aspects of their identities and make positive traits more visible. This idealization process is accelerated by the ease of comparing *Facebook* profiles. Adolescents often view their own identities in light of their peers. Peer pressure and the strong influence of such a public platform lead to the creation of very identical identities, making the *Facebook* identity seem, at times, more like a collective identity than an individual one. Additionally, the *Facebook* identity seems to be distinct to the *Digital Generation* and part of their generational identity. *Digital Natives* are especially willing to reveal a great amount of private information and share it with a large audience. *Facebook* enables adolescents to deliberately construct their own online identities and, by this, gives them a feeling of control in a stage of their lives that can often seem very confusing and uncontrollable.

Facebook has the potential to stabilize the often vulnerable and unstable identities of the adolescent. Within local networks, users are able to affirm each other's online identities and, ergo, stabilize their offline identities. However, such identity enhancement can also get out of hand and lead to a person's dependence on affirmation, attention and confirmation of the idealized identity that has been created.

In the second section of this thesis, I am going to look at a form of identity performance that takes place in a completely different context. Instead of publicly displaying their identities, the *World of Warcraft* online gaming community seeks pure anonymity.

3. Introducing *World of Warcraft*

In the following chapters I will analyze forms of identity performance that take place in the online game *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. I have chosen *WoW* to serve as a representative of what I like to call the “anonymous Internet”. The anonymous Internet is part of the World Wide Web where real life identities are hidden to a certain degree. In *WoW*, for example, players can conceal any kind of private information. Members of the *WoW* community use nicknames instead of real names and avatars to represent their real life physical appearance. *WoW* players do not post pictures of themselves and prefer to stay anonymous. At first sight, *WoW* may seem like any other video game; however, a closer look reveals the game’s potential for endless identity performances. Before I analyze those possibilities, I will present a brief overview about the game.

World of Warcraft is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG). MMORPGs are video games that can only be played online because they require the connection to thousands of other players. People are attracted to games like *WoW* because of this particular connection to its players; instead of fighting computer-controlled opponents, MMORPG players fight each other. The connectivity of *WoW* allows its members to form a gigantic online community where they can interact.

Role-Playing Games (RPGs) are always set in a fantasy world where every player controls one character. *WoW* takes place in the fantasy world of Azeroth. Every player can choose a certain race (human, dwarf, elf, gnome, etc.) and class (warrior, wizard, priest, rogue, etc.) for his or her character and equip the character with a certain skillset. According to their characters’ skills, players form groups to help each other during certain moments in the game. A magician, for example, has the ability to heal group members, while a rogue can open locks or uncover traps. With a certain number of members, a small group can turn into a guild. Guilds are larger congregations of *WoW* players with up to a few hundred members and where most of player interaction takes place. Guild members do not only fight together in the game but also communicate with each other over the guild chat or in forums.

The main goal of the game is to kill as many monsters and complete as many quests as possible. For every dead monster and finished quest, a character will gain experience points (XPs). When a player has gathered enough XPs with his or her

character, he or she will be able to reach the next character level and upgrade its skills. To reach level 80, the highest skill level, a player would have to invest several month of playing time.

Since its release in 2004, *WoW* has garnered more than 10 million subscribers and each pay 13 euros per month to participate. *WoW* has a yearly turnover of more than one billion US dollars and holds the Guinness World Record for the most popular MMORPG.

The following analysis will not focus on how the game is played, but instead, on how its participants use the game to perform different identities. Therefore, I will only briefly discuss some of the aspects on the surface of *WoW* and quickly delve into the greater depth of this game and the anonymous part of the Internet as a whole.

3.1 The Avatar, My Virtual Me

Before a player is able to step into the world of Azeroth, he or she has to decide on an avatar, or character, as it is called in the *WoW* universe. The avatar can represent the player's real life self in the virtual world. Every time a player creates a new avatar, he or she creates a new identity as well. An old avatar can easily be deleted and replaced by a new one. Whenever a player enters the game with a new avatar, it is like being born again. While the appearance of an avatar only represents a lifeless shell, it is up to the players to fill this shell with a soul. The combination of body and soul represents a player's *WoW* identity.

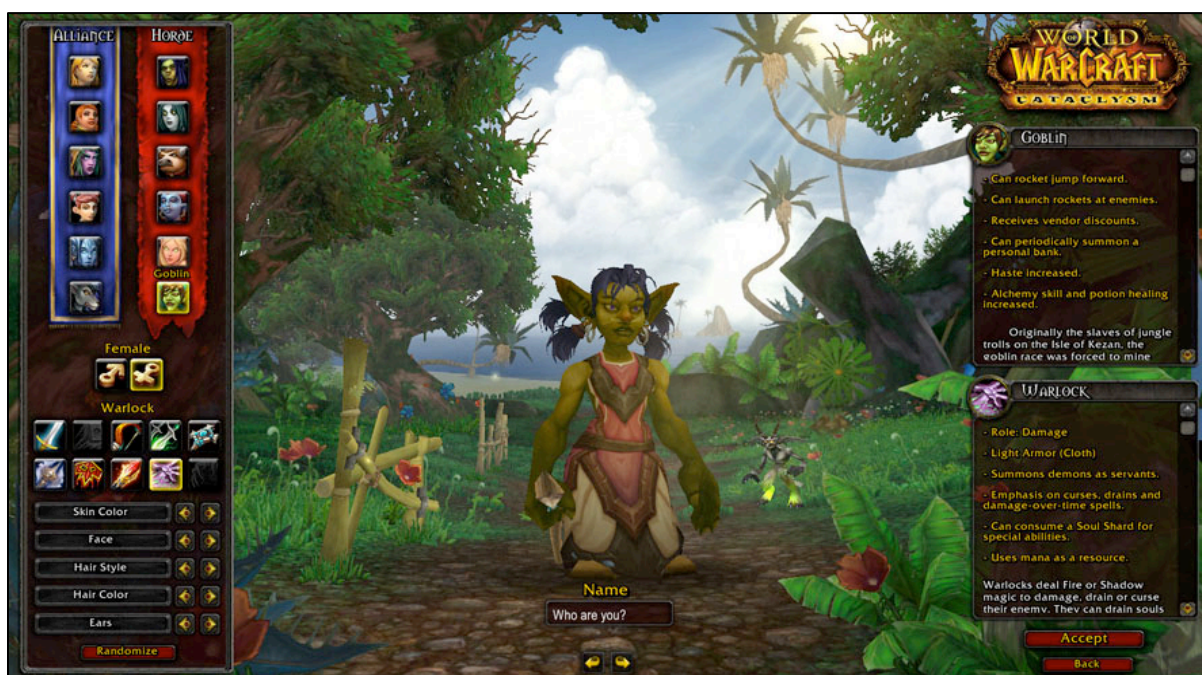


Figure 13. Character creation screen⁴³ in *World of Warcraft*.

The above figure shows a screenshot of where players design an avatar. Because a player's avatar may represent his or her real life self for many months or years, most players carefully fine-tune its attributes. In the top left corner, the player can choose the faction that he or she wants to play for. Within *WoW*, two opposing factions fight against each other. Races like humans, dwarves, gnomes and night elves fight for the virtuous Alliance, while races such as orcs, the forsaken, trolls and ogres make up the vicious Horde. Below the race section, users can find the gender (female or male) and class sections for his or her character.

⁴³ http://www.wowwiki.com/Newbie_guide_to_character_creation

The attributes of each race and class⁴⁴ are shown on the right side of the screenshot⁴⁵. In the bottom left corner, players are able to customize their avatar's appearance. In addition to skin color, players can modify the structure, style and color of the avatar's face as well as pierce its ears. The last thing a player has to decide is the avatar's name. The name is one aspect of a character's identity that most players pay much attention to, because, as Hagström explains, the name in *WoW* is a main identifier and even more relevant than the character's appearance when it comes to player differentiation (2008).

Due to this thesis's focus on identity performance, the following chapters will primarily deal with the avatar's gender, name and appearance. Although the decision on a faction, class, race and profession allow some room for performance and identity play, those identity aspects will not be addressed in this work. This selection has been made because the avatar's gender and name require a rather comprehensive analysis and leave little room to examine other components.

⁴⁴ For example, the Druid, Hunter, Paladin, Priest, Shaman or Rogue.

⁴⁵ In figure 13, this would be the Goblin race and Warlock profession.

3.2 Separating Body and Soul

Gender is a delicate topic within *World of Warcraft*, a parallel universe in which 85%⁴⁶ of its inhabitants are male. This is a world, where, at times, pretending to be of the opposite sex can be an advantage and bear endless opportunities for identity exploration.

Since the beginning of the Internet, many of its users have been engaged in something that experts refer to as gender swapping. Virtual gender swapping, the playful taking on the role of a member of the opposite sex, has been made possible by the complete anonymity that a person is able to experience online. In cyberspace, people are able to detach their souls from their bodies and physical characteristics. Through anonymity, people are able to free their minds from the restrictions of their appearance. Freed from the limitations of an unattractive body (by societal standards) or the benefits of an appealing appearance, people are able to redefine who they are or who they want to be.

As has been already discussed, a person can take on various social roles and therefore express several different identities, each adjusted to the particular social situation. Nevertheless, almost every person has aspects of his or her identity that he or she would like to hide and keep a secret, because they might not be in accordance with societal expectations.

Carl Jung describes this by explaining that people wears different masks in different social situations with each mask reflecting a certain aspect of the person's identity (1963: 212). Aspects that do not comply with the expectations of society are dismissed and pushed in our unconsciousness, forming, as Jung calls it, our "shadow". Furthermore, Jung points out that in order to complete one's individuation⁴⁷ process, one does not only have to deal with one's shadow, but also

⁴⁶ Nick Yee (2008). In another study conducted by Seay, Fleming et al. (2004), of the 1836 respondents who completed their online survey, 90% were male.

⁴⁷ *"Individuation means becoming a single, homogeneous being, and, in so far as 'individuality' embraces an innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self."* (Jung 1963: 209)

find and explore one's anima or animus⁴⁸. The anonymity of the Internet allows a person to explore his or her shadow, anima or animus.

On the Internet, people often express aspects of their identity that they are embarrassed of or that they are afraid of sharing with people they know in the real world. People get together online in interest-driven networks, places where people who share the same interests, problems or ideas meet. In those virtual chat rooms, forums or gaming worlds, people are able to discover, explore and experiment with identities that might be considered "non-conventional" in real life (Rosenmann and Safir 2006).

Researchers (Bruckmann 1992; Vogelgesang 2000; Yee 2008) have found that adolescent boys are especially interested in switching their gender when they are given the possibility in a virtual and anonymous gaming environment. However, female players, who also seem to enjoy several advantages of acting as a member of the opposite sex, also tend to swap their gender from time to time. The following section aims to analyze why some boys prefer to pretend to be girls and why some girls like to play with male characters.

3.2.1 Boys Being Girls, Finding Attention and *Anima*

As has been mentioned previously, male gamers dominate *World of Warcraft*. With only 15% of female players, the possibility of encountering a player of the opposite sex during one's rambles through the game is rather slim. By this means, female players are seen as something special and treated with much more care. When in need, female players seldom have to wait very long for a male player to approach them to offer assistance. Additionally, due to the rareness of female *WoW* players and the anonymity of the Internet, male players are quick to practice fierce flirting via the in-game chat. In his research, Suler (2004) revealed that the main reason boys create a female avatar is to draw attention to their character, that is, to receive all the help and romantic approaches they might not experience in reality.

⁴⁸ According to Jung, each male personality contains a hidden female force (*anima*) and each female personality a male force (*animus*).

To understand these curious practices, we have to take a closer look at how *World of Warcraft* is actually played. *WoW* is based on a “level up” principle featured in most RPGs, meaning that a character must gain a certain amount of XPs by killing opponents or fulfilling quests to reach the next level. The higher the character’s level, the stronger the opponents and the more difficult the tasks. Very often, help or advice from others is needed to advance in the game. Especially in the later stages of the game, players have to work together to complete certain missions. When you are a female character, the chances of receiving such help and assistance are much greater than when you are playing as a male character (Suler 2004 n.p.).

Although video games have been a mainstream medium for some time, *MMORPGs*, particularly because they demand so much playing time in order to complete the game, are still a sanctuary for “nerds” and “geeks”. Allison explains that many of *WoW* players have a “different perspective on social life” (2006: 383). If one really wants to be a competitive *WoW* player able to reach a certain character level and status within the community, one’s real world social life has to be neglected in some form.

While the average *MMORPG* player plays 23 hours⁴⁹ a week, younger participants, especially those still attending school and have more free time available, spend much more time in the virtual world. The time spent in virtual worlds is lost in the real world. While other boys make their first romantic encounters with the opposite sex, many of their counterparts spend time alone in their room playing *WoW* or other games and chatting with people they have never and will never encounter in real life.

Boys can have a difficult time interacting with girls they like especially during puberty. Situations can feel awkward and embarrassing. The virtual world and its anonymity gives boys the opportunity to not only interact with girls without inhibition, but even more, test out how it is to be a girl, how it feels to be flirted with or how flirting actually works. Additionally, Suler says “the gender-switched male may even like the feeling of power and control over other males that goes along with the switch” (2004).

Another possible explanation why adolescent males seek the anonymity of the cyberspace to experiment with female identities is that of societal restrictions. In our society, identities that are non-conventional are often looked down upon by the mainstream. The idea of conformity makes people wear masks in public, hiding their

⁴⁹ Yee (2006).

“true” selves in order to avoid strange reactions from their peers. In movies, commercials or sports, boys are always confronted with cultural stereotypes that tell them a “real” man has to be tough, muscular, charm ladies and a hero. Why have few, if any, male football players outed themselves as homosexual? Likely because his immediate environment, including fans and other males, would not accept it. These conditions make it rather difficult for boys to interact with their inner anima. Although homosexuality is slowly becoming established in our society and accepted by an increasing portion of the population, it is still very challenging for men, whether homosexual or straight, to publicly express female aspects of their personality.

This conflict that many young males are having is represented in the emo⁵⁰ culture, a youth subculture that has gained mainstream popularity over the last decade in which girls and boys pay a lot of attention to their appearance. Some emo boys adapt their own style to that of their female friends by putting on black mascara, straitening their hair and polishing their nails. Male emos are not afraid of showing emotions that are considered “untypical” for boys. Because emos reject established social and aesthetic norms they receive feelings of resentment from many of their peers who are not part of the emo subculture. Especially during high school years, a time when young men are still rather insecure about their identities and place in society, a boy has to prove to his male classmates that he is indeed a “true” man. However, if a boy is not willing to conform to male stereotypes, he has a greater chance of being physically or verbally victimized by his peers. Words like “gay” or “fag” may be said, and physical harm may even occur if an emo boy encounters different-minded teenagers. In many Internet forums, “emo bashing” is a popular way to let out anger against the emo culture. In one instance in Querétaro, Mexico⁵¹, members of other youth subcultures, primarily fueled by homophobia⁵², aggressively attacked people at a public emo meeting.

Although there were and always will be conflicts between different youth subcultures, the general negative and aggressive treatment of the emo subculture exemplifies how society rejects “female” personality traits within a man. Under these circumstances, male emos and other men who wish to express aspects of their

⁵⁰ Emo (emotional hardcore) is a youth subculture that evolved out of mid-1980s hardcore punk. Its members listen to indie rock, wear black clothes, make up and show more emotions than other teenagers.

⁵¹ In 2008 about 1000 teenagers stormed a public meeting by members of the emo subculture in the Mexican city Querétaro. Four people were hurt and 28 arrested.

⁵² Grillo (2008)

female side, seek the anonymity of the Internet to do so. Suler suggests that the Internet gives men the opportunity to explore aspects of their identity that society labels as feminine, characteristics of their personality that would stay hidden under normal circumstances.


<p>Urbak ◦</p> <p>Join Date: Aug 2012 Posts: 23</p> 	<p>Race change.</p> <p>Will there be at any time in the future a chance to buy a race/sex change?</p> <p>at the moment i'm playing a female norn and i'm kind of feeling guilty about it(i'm a man in RL) it's silly i know but i can't help it.</p> <p>I've tried all the others and find the female norns animations are just suited to my play style, if the charr ran on two feet(i can't get used to running on all fours) it would be no contest.</p>
<p>StacyX ◦</p>  <p>Join Date: Jul 2012 Location: California, USA Posts: 978</p>	<p>I doubt their will ever be a race change as the personal stories are effected by race. I don't know if sex effects the personal stories though, if not, then they just may allow it later via cash shop. I'm pretty sure they will be offering "cosmetic surgery" via the cash shop (where you can change the face and hair of your character).</p> <p>In any case, don't feel "guilty". I never feel guilty when I play male characters, why would you feel guilty playing a female character? As long as you're not one of those guys who pretend to be female then try and get free stuff from people (guys need to quit that shit, it makes us actual female gamers look bad). I hope you're not trying to pretend to be a female IRL, that's all I'm saying. lol Guys pretending to be girls are what keeps perpetuating a lot of the stereotypes about girl gamers.</p>

Figure 14. Forum discussion about males pretending to be females.

The above discussion between Urbak and StacyX, taken from a popular gamer forum⁵³, perfectly exemplifies some of the main points of the previous paragraphs. As Urbak explains, he is a man in real life (RL) who plays a female character in *WoW*. He has to justify his actions to other forum members because, although he enjoys playing as a female character, it feels wrong to him. This guilt may stem from the assumption that a man pretending to be a woman is either a transvestite or pervert. StacyX reassures Urbak and tells him not to feel ashamed for switching gender, because she also does it. Furthermore, StacyX seems to have noticed that many men pretend to be female to get “free stuff”⁵⁴ from other male players, an action that she strongly rejects because it discredits real female players. StacyX concludes her post by saying she hopes Urbak does not pretend to be female “IRL” [in real life]. She does not clarify why but she may perceive men who act or dress like females as

⁵³ <http://www.guildwars2forum.com/threads/9318-Race-change>

⁵⁴ In *WoW* players can collect coins, tools and weapons, and, if they like, pass it over to another player.

weird and abnormal. This again confirms a societal prejudice that men who pretend to be female deviate from accepted norms.

Before I analyze why StacyX and other females use male avatars in *WoW*, another conclusion can be drawn from the discussion between Urnbak and StacyX.

Since the first video game protagonists have been developed, men have played with female characters. May it be Lara Croft⁵⁵, Samus Aran⁵⁶, Jill Valentine⁵⁷ or endless other female characters in any beat 'em up⁵⁸ video game, men have rarely, if ever, considered this morally questionable. However, the difference between RPGs and any other video game is that the player's identities truly merge with that of the character that they are playing with. As has been explained, if someone really wants to achieve a high level in *WoW*, he or she has to use the same character for months, if not years, to do so. Unlike the aforementioned female video game characters, *WoW* players are able to equip their avatars with a unique identity by giving them a name, customizing their appearance and deliberately choosing their gender, class, race and profession. If a man plays as a female avatar in an RPG for a long time, he will not only be perceived by others as being a woman, but he might also start to acknowledge some of the female personality traits that are within him. While not all men who play with a female avatar will eventually interact with their female side, *WoW* certainly creates the possibilities to do so.

Gender-swapping is an opportunity to explore conflicts raised by one's biological gender. (...) By enabling people to experience what it "feels" like to be the opposite gender at all, the practice encourages reflection on the way ideas about gender shape our expectations.

(Turkle 2010: 10)

⁵⁵ Main character in the *Tomb Raider* video game series.

⁵⁶ Protagonist of the *Metroid* video game series.

⁵⁷ Main character in the *Resident Evil* video game series.

⁵⁸ Combat video game genre (e.g. *Street Fighter*, *Tekken*, *Dead or Alive*).

3.2.2 Girls Being Boys, a Quest for Power



Figure 15. A forum discussion about the gender ratio in *WoW*.⁵⁹

The above forum posts were taken from an online discussion about how female *WoW* players feel about being part of a minority. The statements by Vianica and Jorrok show that the situation of female players in the game is quite different from that of males. As Vianica points out, the paternalistic behavior of many male players can be offensive and rather inappropriate. Several similar forum posts concerning the participation of female players in *WoW* reveal that many male players look down on female gamers. Vianica explains that she is quite used to male gamers questioning her gender and, when they are convinced she is female, they question her skills. To understand this kind of male behavior, we have to explore the evolution of video games designed for females.

For quite a while, video games have been a male domain. The first games were not developed to cater to the interests of girls and were often about sports, shooting, smashing and fighting. Such games did not generate much female enthusiasm. After the popularity of video games grew among males, game developers decided to create games primarily aimed at a female audience, or such games that would be interesting to both genders. *The Sims*,⁶⁰ *Dance Dance Revolution*⁶¹, *Rollercoaster*

⁵⁹ <http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/2290820068>

⁶⁰ A video game in which the player has to build a house, create a family, get a job and make friends.

⁶¹ A motion sensor video game in which the players have to reproduce dance moves that displayed on the screen.

*Tycoon*⁶², *Wii Fit*⁶³, *Farmville*⁶⁴, *SingStar*⁶⁵ and many other games were developed to make video games more interesting to women.

Most video games developed for girls are nonviolent and social; i.e., they can be played with friends. Regarding the latter characteristic, Yee discovered that “female gamers are about twice as likely to be playing with someone else in the same room than male gamers” (2008: 87). One of the main reasons why female players have made their way into *World of Warcraft* is the opportunity to socialize. Within the virtual network of *WoW* players, individuals can chat, meet new people and make new friends. Because the game is accessible worldwide, gamers are always in the company of others and never have the feeling of truly playing alone. Yee also points out that female players are drawn to the game due to its storytelling potential and chance to customize their avatar (2008: 86). Male players, on the other hand, are more interested in advancing their characters⁶⁶ and challenging and dominating other players. Although *WoW* is a violent and competitive game, its game concept is broad enough to be appealing to both genders.

Because men have dominated video games, especially RPGs, for such a long time, some male players believe that females are trespassing into their territory:

When I played WoW, I was so sick and tired of being treated like a moron or hit on 24–7 that I made a male character. The way people treat female characters and males in WoW was drastic, I had immediate respect. When on a female char, men think you don't know how to play, cant be hardcore, and try to give you things to hit on you. It is annoying to say the least.

(Female World of Warcraft Player)

As this female *WoW* player, interviewed by Yee, describes, men treat male and female players very differently (2008: 94). This former player said she felt her skills were underestimated by her male co-players. Comments and forum posts by many

⁶² A simulation video game that lets the players manage the finances of an amusement park.

⁶³ A fitness game for the Nintendo Wii that lets players perform different yoga or aerobic exercises with the help of a motion sensor.

⁶⁴ A simulation video game that lets the players manage their own farm.

⁶⁵ A karaoke game that lets players perform pop songs with several friends.

⁶⁶ Yee explains that the advancement of one's character includes aspects such as general progress, gaining power and status as well as accumulating items.

other female *WoW* players suggest an underlying assumption by many male players that women are not competitive enough to play. This rather arrogant attitude can also be witnessed in real life when men discuss the performance of female athletes. Although most men respect the performance of professional female athletes, there always seems to be the assumption that a man could have done it better. Apparently, this mindset has been transferred into the virtual world of *WoW*, a realm in which female gamers have to prove themselves worthy of playing with “the guys”. While the pejorative remarks of many male players could be attributed to their immaturity, it is still rather unfortunate that female players have to deal with this kind of behavior. However, unlike female athletes competing in the real world who have to deal with male loudmouths, female gamers are able to use the anonymity of the Internet and simply swap their gender. After the interviewed *WoW* player changed into a male avatar, she had no problems of being taken serious by male players. This form of gender swapping gives female gamers the opportunity to experience immediate respect from males without having to prove that one is good at something



Figure 16. A female and male avatar wearing the same clothing set named “Glorious”.⁶⁷

beforehand. After the gender barrier drops, females are finally equal to their male co-players and able to view the world from a man’s perspective. Many female players report that after they changed their character’s gender they were finally able to become the leader of a guild and make male players follow their command. While most male players would not obey the instructions of a female player, they would do so if she would play as a male character and have a high experience level.

Another reason why female players may change their gender is that male players frequently proposition them. Since 85% of

WoW players are male, encountering a woman in the game is rare. Many female players complain that they are annoyed by the amount of male players who constantly try to chat them up. Again, this shows that many male players do not view female avatars as competition but, rather, as sexual objects. This problem is also

reflected in Jorrok's statement, which addresses character design in *WoW* advertisements. He states that while male avatars have a "bulky" appearance and are equipped with massive armor, female avatars have large breasts and not as much armor as their male counterparts, which can be observed in figure 16. While the male avatar's body is almost completely covered in armor, the same armor type barely covers half of the female's body. Jorrok feels that this kind of character design clearly indicates that *WoW* is a video game been made for men. The constant propositioning and objectification of the female body makes many girls play with a male avatar in *WoW*. Finally freed from the force of male gamer's attraction to a female character, female players are able to immerse themselves into the pack of male warriors and enjoy the game.

I mostly play female characters but sometimes I make a male character and don't let anyone know I'm female in real life. It's interesting how different people treat you when they think you are male. Kind of like a window into their strange man universe.

- Female *World of Warcraft* Player (Hussain and Griffiths 2008: 297)

If we take a closer look at Jorrok's statement about who *WoW* advertisements are aimed at, we can see how Jorrok confirms Maxthedragon's argument that *WoW* is primarily aimed at boys and, furthermore, describes them as "oh so lonely guys". This statement confirms the "lonely geek" stereotype that many male *WoW* players have to deal with.

Even long before *South Park*⁶⁸ produced the episode "Make Love, Not Warcraft"⁶⁹ in October 2006, *WoW* players had to deal with the fact that they are publicly viewed as computer freaks whose best friend is their glimmering screen. Although interests such as magic and fantasy worlds are stigmatized among teenagers as "uncool", the

⁶⁸ *South Park* is an animated US TV series that has a worldwide audience and is incredibly popular among teenagers,

⁶⁹ This *South Park* episode is believed to be one of the best episodes ever produced. It depicts the addictive nature of *WoW* and stereotypes great player as having no life. At the end of the episode, the four young protagonists of the *South Park* series spend their entire days, weeks and months in front of their computer and have become morbidly obese and pimpled geeks. "Make Love, Not Warcraft" wasn't just a parody of the MMORPG craze, but also an ode to those who have given their life over to their online avatar." (Iverson 2006)

main reason why this rather negative stereotype of the *WoW* player prevails is because very good *WoW* players put an unbelievable amount of time into the game.

In the *South Park* episode, Kenny, Eric, Stan and Kyle, the main protagonists of the series, are on a quest to kill a *WoW* player who randomly murders avatars in the *Warcraft* universe. Because the player's avatar has such a high level and strong killing power, the boys assume that he has "no life" because he must spend his entire time playing *WoW*. To end the terror, the boys have to solve the philosophical question of how you kill someone who has no life.

3.2.3 The Deconstruction of Gender in *WoW*

In the previous two chapters I discussed why male and female *WoW* players engage in the process of gender swapping. In order to point out current social circumstances, the virtual world has often been compared with relevant examples from the real world. In our society, gender construction is very one-sided; from an early age, popular media tells us what it takes to be man or woman. Adolescents are strongly influenced by male and female stereotypes created by television, movies, the Internet or magazines. Gender has more or less turned into a performance that idealizes the characteristics that constitute a man or a woman. As Goffman points out, when both performers (media) and the audience (society) are convinced about the show that is put on, "then for the moment at last nobody will have any doubts about the realness of what is presented" (28). Gender roles are so deeply imprinted in our minds that it is difficult for us to imagine any deviations from the norm. The anonymity of the Internet allows us to explore and experiment with gender roles that are not in accordance with the established model. When we enter the virtual worlds, safely placed in front of our computers, we do not have to fear any ridicule, repudiation or laughter when exploring non-conventional identities, but can experiment with those identities that seem right to us.

The previous two chapters have described why *WoW* players swap genders. Male players tend to play with avatars of the opposite sex to receive attention and help, as well as to break through the established gender roles. Female players, on the other hand, choose to play with male avatars in order to gain respect from their male co-

players and avoid constant propositioning. Additionally, by changing their gender, females are able to gain power and control over men and become leaders of clans and guilds.

Therefore, gender swapping changes how we are perceived and treated by others (Morahan-Martin 1999: 435) and, more importantly, how we perceive ourselves. Bruckmann, for example, says that “the constant assumption that women need help can be damaging to a woman’s sense of self-esteem and competence” (1996: 325). A female MMORPG player, interviewed by Vanderheiden, explains that “as a woman in real life, you ask for help because you figure it will be expedient. Then you realize that you aren’t figuring things out for yourself” (Vanderheiden n.p.). As this last quote exemplifies, by confronting ourselves with the opposite sex, we learn how gender is constructed. The Internet enables us to free ourselves from established gender roles and create such roles that suit our own individuality. Vella points out that gender swapping “can lead to a deeper level of understanding of the opposite gender” (2010: n.p.); a man may experience what it feels like to be a woman at a male-dominated workplace, while a woman may understand how harsh and competitive the interaction between males can be.

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” This quote, from William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, has been used in the chapter on identity performance to illustrate that every person performs his or her identities. At this point, the play will be used again to serve as a reference to help clarify the function that lies behind the process of gender swapping.

In the play, two female characters Rosalind and Cecilia are forced to flee their home after Duke Frederick banned them from court. As the two women plan to seek Cecilia’s uncle in the forest of Arden, they decide to disguise themselves to avoid any dangers (Rosalind: “Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold.”). While Cecilia hides her attractiveness behind a smirched face and poor clothes, Rosalind, due to her unusual height, decides to pretend to be a man. At the end, Rosalind disguises herself from the outside (“A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh, A boar-spear in my hand”) as well as the inside (“and—in my heart, / Lie there what hidden woman’s fear there will”). Furthermore, she explains: “We’ll have a swashbuckling and martial outside, / as many other mannish cowards have / That do outface it with their

semblances.”⁷⁰ In this passage, “Rosalind suggests that men routinely adopt the same kind of pose she is now choosing” (Hopkins 1998: 399). In other words, men and women construct their gender. Hopkins continues, explaining that “if Rosalind and Celia make themselves unattractive, they will end up less feminine. Their female gender will end up deconstructed” (399). The consequences of Rosalind swapping genders are similar to those caused by female *WoW* players who change their avatar’s gender. In the play, other men do not harass Rosalind and she is able to have conversations with men that are quite different from conversations she would have if she was a woman. The play supports the assumption that gender swapping may lead to a deeper level of understanding of the opposite gender and, therefore, to a more comprehensive understanding of the different identities that lie within each of us.

To sum up this chapter, I want to use the words of Amy Bruckman, who states: “Gender swapping is an extreme example of a fundamental fact: the network is in the process of changing not just how we work, but how we think of ourselves – and ultimately, who we are” (322).

⁷⁰ All quotes were taken from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* (End of Act I, Scene III: A room in the palace).

3.3 The Avatar's Name, an Epic Battle for Anonymity

Our name is a very important aspect of our identity. It can inform others about the time period in which we were born, if we are male or female and hints about our nationality. Richard Wiseman, a professor from the University of Hertfordshire, says that “if you have a name which sounds intelligent or attractive, then you could be treated differently, or behave in a different way” (Chamary 2009: n.p.). Thus, our name not only influences the way that people think about us, but also how we think about ourselves. In real life, our appearance quickly pushes the importance of our name into the background; on the Internet, our names have a much stronger influence on how other people perceive us. It has already been explained that the Internet offers us the possibility to separate our bodies from our souls. In *WoW*, players do not perform with their own bodies, but with self-constructed appearances of their avatars. Unless the players have met each other in real life, they do not know what the person on the other side of the screen looks like. The members of the *WoW* community do not tend to post pictures or other information about themselves in the forums and prefer to stay as anonymous as possible.

Each player can use the character creator to design an avatar that is as individual as possible; however, since players have to use preset graphics to do so, their influence on characters' physical identity is limited. A player's name, on the other hand, has to be created from the scratch. It is the first identity marker that other players will get to know about a new member and something that will accompany the player for his or her entire *WoW* career. A player's name shows up next to every forum post as well as on the server list that can be accessed and viewed by every player on that server. A player's name can give information about the player's individuality and creativity. A player's username is an even more important identifier than his or her avatar's appearance when it comes to distinguishing players (Hagström 2008), which the following text demonstrates:

(...) Slimeball, if you are reading this, I'm sorry, but I hate your name. I remember you from Alterac Valley weekends, you're a dwarf hunter and I'm sure your pet has a stupid name as well, like ..."Bear". You were definitely not from my server, perhaps Chrushridge or Burning Legion?

...anyways, it doesn't matter, your name still sucks. I even mentioned your name to others in WoW, and I said I was sure that you were also a bad player, probably had your pet on aggressive in heroics, gemmed for spirit, and had never been able to get into a raid – surely not with that name.

I'm sorry Slimeball, but I can't help it, I judge people by their names, and I judge you.

- Welclaw (World of Warcraft player)⁷¹

This comment shows how important a name can be for some *WoW* players. Welclaw accuses Slimeball of having a bad name and assumes him of being a poor player who would not get into any raids⁷². Without knowing anything else about the player, Welclaw makes generalizations about Slimeball's identity. Although Welclaw's reaction is rather exaggerated, it clearly illustrates two circumstances that are typical for the anonymous Internet. First, communication between people on the Internet can be quite harsh when their real life identities are hidden behind nicknames, especially among younger people. The anonymity of the Internet seems to suggest to many participants that there are no consequences for their actions and, therefore, no restrictions to their behavior. It is questionable if Welclaw would have talked like this to Slimeball in a face-to-face situation, especially if we regard the reason for his or her discontent. Second, the players nicknames are the most important markers of identity, which supports Hagström's theory. As Welclaw's post shows, a player's name is assessed and judged by the community. Aspects of a person's identity, such as ones usually used to form first impressions in real life, do not exist in *WoW*. Besides their digital avatars, players are unable to use their physical bodies, facial expressions, clothes, jewelry, sounds or fragrances to create identity. Therefore, before any relevant communication between two players takes place, a person's identity will be limited to his or her name and avatar.

Others will not only judge a player's name according to its creativity, but also if it obeys the cultural coding of the *WoW* universe. The greatest mistake a new player

⁷¹ Originally posted on a *WoW* forum, this comment has been reposted on the following website: <http://ironyca.wordpress.com/2011/02/01/for-the-love-of-names-gender-bending-pt-9/>

⁷² At the beginning of the game, players tend to play by themselves, but at later stages players get together in raid groups to fight larger armies or stronger monsters.

can make is to choose a name from other fantasy worlds like *The Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*⁷³. Some popular *WoW* names include Herous, Shradeer, Brandar, Arthes, Deathknighter, Shadowdeath, Nromar, Ghosthunter, Jougerhunt, Deadman, Krafter, EpicDamage, Firemage, xXgrundXx, Shadowpriest, Shadow, Bersek, healburn⁷⁴. These names indicate that *WoW* is a fantasy RPG where players create characters that fit into this world of dragons and dungeons. Most players choose names that have a story to tell; however, usernames can also be used to create a more idealized version of the self. This aspect of identity performance has already been discussed in the Facebook chapter, in which we analyzed how Facebook users deliberately select pictures, videos and written words in order to represent a more perfect version of themselves. The idealization of the own identity can be much more excessive in *WoW* than on Facebook, for example, because players are not limited to their real life identities. In *WoW*, the creation of a new identity starts from scratch and identity construction only confined to players' imaginations. *WoW* enables its players to produce very heroic and powerful identities, only demanding a rich fantasy and a boundless devotion to the game. For this reason, players like Welclaw are angered by other players who choose names such as "Slimeball". The *WoW* programmers constructed the game to create the illusion of a society that is completely separate from our real life societies. If some players do not completely devote themselves to this idea, many will view them as a threat to this illusion.

Prof. Dr. Ernst explains that computer games are becoming more realistic and their programmers constantly get closer to the idea of "creating real life in an unreal world" (Mischke 2004 n.p.). To some players, *WoW* is just a game they play from time to time; to others, it is a second reality that is much more interesting than real life.

WoW gives its players the possibility to hide their real life identities behind their avatars and usernames. The aforementioned names demonstrate that most players choose masculine and powerful names. While in real life, a person might be a coward or pushover, he or she has the possibility to be a brave warrior in the virtual world. Thus, a self-created name contributes to the way a player is perceived by others as well as how he or she perceives his or her own identity. The sister of a teenage boy who frequently plays RPGs with his virtual friends and calls himself

⁷³ This is explained on the "*WoW* Newbie guide to character creation" website.
<http://www.wowwiki.com/Newbie_guide_to_character_creation>

⁷⁴ <<http://www.wow-forum.com/de/69323-charakter-name-2.html>>

“Saddam got pwned!” said that her brother takes on a different identity when he plays with his avatar: “When I watch my brother yell, laugh, and react to his friends through the game talk, TeamSpeak and Xfire⁷⁵, it’s not the brother I deal with day-to-day. He’s a much gruffer person” (Ito, et al. 184).

Gender swapping enables male *WoW* players to explore female aspects of their identity; however, the game also gives them the possibility to interact with their masculine identity. Being able to scream, kill, curse and flirt gives adolescent boys the chance to explore the stereotype of a man that they are offered by the media. Boys, who might be shy and unsecure, are given the possibility to be the man that they might not be able to be in the real world. They can interact with females without anxiety, dominate other players and have a large peer network in which they are popular and respected.

Ito et al. claims that boys are able to find a peer group that shares the same insider knowledge and expertise when they play online games (184). Within this interest-driven network, boys negotiate status according to different criteria than the real world. In the offline world adolescent boys negotiate status through the clothes they wear, sports they play and girls they know, but the virtual environment within *WoW* “provides a space for socializing that is an alternative to the mainstream status regimes that boys navigate in their everyday lives” (Ito et al. 185). Status in *WoW* is based on the experience level that a player has reached with his or her character; therefore, the higher the character’s level, the more time a player will have to invest into the game. In a way, one’s offline status and online status correlate with each other – the more time one spends in a virtual world, the less time one has to foster real life relationships. To many, however, it is much easier to generate status and popularity in *WoW* than in real life. A high status in *WoW* only requires some months of intensive playing as well as a remarkable avatar and name. In the game, a player’s name and heroic actions can quickly spread to other servers and turn this player into a small celebrity.

While the right username can help put a *WoW* player into the spotlight, the primary function of the nickname is to keep the player out of it. In the virtual world, a

⁷⁵ *TeamSpeak* and *Xfire* are in-game programs that enable players to communicate with each other via sound or text.

player is able to gain the status of a fearless hero and his or her name may be known among hundreds of other players even though his or her real life identity is not being revealed. Anonymity is the most important aspect of the *WoW* universe because it enables the players to experiment with different aspects of their identity, change their gender or reveal facets of their personality that they keep hidden in real life interactions. Anonymity is such a crucial factor to *WoW* players that tens of thousands of them moved into an “epic battle” against Blizzard⁷⁶ on 6 July 2010.

In the summer of 2010, Blizzard decided to introduce Real ID, a new feature to the gaming platform *battle.net*⁷⁷. The company announced that the introduction of a Real ID would make it mandatory for all players to connect their nicknames to their real life names. The main motivation for Blizzard to do so was to enable more meaningful and productive discussions within the forums. In the original post, Blizzard said that:

*(...) Removing the veil of anonymity typical to online dialogue will contribute to a more positive forum environment, promote constructive conversations, and connect the Blizzard community in ways they haven't been connected before.*⁷⁸

Only three days after Blizzard posted this statement, they withdrew their plans. This swift change was the result of an astonishing 49,896 comments⁷⁹ that the first announcement received. Players were outraged about the plan and expressed this discontent. Tholian, one of the first commenters, comprehensively sums up the anxiety that many *WoW* players experienced:

⁷⁶ Blizzard Entertainment is the company that produces *WoW* and many other role-playing games.

⁷⁷ An account on *battle.net* is needed to play *WoW* and other games by Blizzard. The platform also hosts several forums that allow players to communicate.

⁷⁸ <http://us.battle.net/en/realid/>

⁷⁹ Blizzard posted both announcements in forum threads on which the players were able to comment. Unfortunately, Blizzard has deleted both threads, however, several user posts have been preserved on:

<http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3624/3006>

Okay this is a TERRIBLE idea. [...] I know a lot of people are going to just simply STOP using the forums when you do this, you're not bringing us together, you're making us all too afraid to interact with each other out of fear of identity theft and the like. So now people who want to add me to their friend list will have my login Email, my real name, etc. ... ARE YOU KIDDING ME?! [...] please Please PLEASE don't do this! I guarantee you'll be tearing apart your community more than bringing us together. If this change goes through, it better not be retroactive to all previous posts, otherwise you better delete all previous posts ever made. Goodbye WoW forums, hello MMO Champion forums, the untarnished Warcraft forum.

(Tholian, 6 July 2010)⁸⁰

This post illustrates how important anonymity is to a large amount of *WoW* players. Tholian writes that he is primarily concerned about the protection of his or her private information. Like Tholian, many other users threatened to leave the forums if the company implemented their plans. Most players were scared that too much of their private information would be revealed and other players would harass them. Tholian's post, however, shows that he or she is not solely concerned about his or her email address or real name being revealed, but about his or her older forum posts being connected with his or her real name. The anxiety is based on the concern that if the forum administrator⁸¹ does not delete a thread, all posts that have ever been made in this thread will stay there forever. Although Tholian dedicates only one short sentence to this, it is likely a large concern to him or her.

As has been discussed, the anonymity of the Internet allows its users to experiment with identities in the most "abnormal" ways. People play around with various personas or identity aspects that they would usually be embarrassed of. Many are in need of this anonymity to express facets of their identity that they would keep hidden under normal circumstances. Several experts (Jung 1962; Rogers 1951)

⁸⁰ The original post was located at:

<http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1>

However, since the forum thread has been deleted, it can be accessed at:

<http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3624/3006>

⁸¹ The administrator of the forum is Blizzard. This means that only if the company decides to delete a forum thread, the posts of the players would be deleted from the Internet. Blizzard's decision to delete their own forum thread that announced the introduction of Real ID originated primarily out of the need to soothe tensions among the players.

refer to this hidden identity as a person's "true self". Carl Jung believed that aspects of our identity that we are afraid of revealing are stored in our unconsciousness. Most of the time, this fear is based on the disapproval of others or sanctions we would receive from our peers. Psychologist Carl Rogers supported Jung's conception of the true self and developed a type of psychotherapy to "provide patients with an opportunity to develop a sense of self wherein they can realize how their attitudes, feelings and behavior are being negatively affected and make an effort to find their true positive potential" (Cepeda and Davenport 2006: 4). Bargh et al. explains that Rogers viewed the true self of his clients as a hidden psychological phenomenon, something that is not fully expressed in social life (2002: 34). This means that society forces us to keep taboo or negative aspects of our identity a secret, even to our family or close friends. There are, however, several reasons why people have the desire to reveal the hidden aspects of their identities. First, Jung views the interaction with one's shadow as mandatory in order to unite consciousness and unconsciousness and complete one's individuation process. Second, Bargh et al. mentions that most people experience the need to have others see us as we see ourselves (36). Third, Rogers explains that "the true self is composed of important aspects of one's identity that one does not often have validated as real by the significant other's in one's life" (Bargh et al. 36).

The release of this inner human need can be witnessed in the *WoW* forums, but also in numerous forums all over the Internet. Forums are interest-driven communities where people with the same interests gather. Protected by the concealment of one's identity, forum members are able to discuss topics that they would not be able to discuss in a face-to-face situations. A person is able to express his or her "true self" in such forums and can let other members of the community validate these formerly hidden aspects of his or her identity. Very often, close relationships between forum members evolve out of the deep and emotional conversations that take place. According to Derlega and Chaikin, "a major function of friendships and love relationships may be to validate one's self-concept by obtaining the support and understanding of the other person" (1977: 110).

By now, it is understandable why Tholian is afraid of his or her previous posts being connected to his or her real life name. Discussions in online forums are able to be more emotional, revealing and unrestrained because they take place behind the

veil of anonymity. Blizzard's plan of removing that veil would have exposed and embarrassed many *WoW* forum users. Another reason why anonymity is important for this kind of online community is made particularly salient by a 21-year-old disabled woman:

By revealing my name, you can now find out everything about me. What does that do to a 21-year-old disabled woman? It makes me a target. Now, obviously not everyone is going to go insane and start going on WoW murdering sprees, but I have already had some pretty unkind things said about me when people do find out. I'm not going to stand for this. I will not yet again be taunted and harassed by ignorant, uncaring jerks, just because they're able to see who I am.

(Animahli, 7 July 2010)⁸²

In order to escape harassment and unfortunate behavior of male players, female *WoW* players use a male avatar. Animahli explains that she has already been the victim of such conduct and the Real ID would prevent her from escaping it. In the real world, Animahli is a disabled woman and, as she points out, has felt bad at times because of it. On the Internet, Animahli is equal to everybody else.

Since the Internet has gained mainstream popularity, it has been a sanctuary for all kinds of minority groups. The Internet gives people that are discriminated in everyday life the opportunity to converge and meet in interest-driven forums to privately discuss relevant issues. On the Internet, no one is reduced to his or her appearance, gender, sexual orientation, beliefs or physical disability. Turkle points out that in games which allow players to use avatars to represent their identities, "one's body is represented by one's textual description" (1996: 12). So, if a person has had enough of being discriminated against by others, he or she can simply rewrite his or her identity and become the person they want to be.

Animahli said she has been reduced to her handicap by many people and has decided to conceal this information in the description of her virtual self. People do not make assumptions when they looked at or interacted with her, because all they can see are her words, which are equal to everybody else's. Anonymity is important to

⁸² <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3624/3006>

Animahli because it helps her escape the superficiality and ignorance of society that treats her differently.

The fictional online usernames and the identities represented by them are very important to *WoW* players. Just like an avatar, a name can accompany a player for month or years. A player can become so used to his or her name and identity it stands for that a name change would equal the death of his or her character. When Hagström analyzed a distressed player forced to change his name, she wrote: “On the Internet, he is his name, and only his name: It is his identity” (2008: 275).

After many players announced they would abandon *WoW* if Real IDs were implemented, a Blizzard employee decided to set a good example and post a comment using his real name. Within a few minutes, *WoW* community members uncovered his private information, including his resume, favorite music, details about his living arrangements, his age as well as the names of family members and the school that his children were attending. With only a few clicks, the *WoW* community showed what removing the veil of anonymity could lead to. Blizzard eventually recanted their proposition and posted the following statement:

We've been constantly monitoring the feedback you've given us, as well as internally discussing your concerns about the use of real names on our forums. As a result of those discussions, we've decided at this time that real names will not be required for posting on official Blizzard forums

(Mike Morhaime, president of Blizzard, 9 July 2012)⁸⁴

After three long days and an epic battle that included almost 50,000 forum posts, *WoW* players were finally able to avert the change that represented the worst-case scenario to them. Anonymity prevailed and the players' fear that their beloved game would turn into something like Facebook vanished. This ultimate fear was expressed in two of the last comments that Blizzard received about their announcement:

⁸⁴ The original post was located at: <http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=25968987278&sid=1>, but after the deletion of the thread the announcement is available at: <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3624/3006>

I did not sign up to play World of Farmville on Battlebook.

(Ranoë, 9 July 2010)⁸⁵

I don't worry about stalkers. I'm a shape shifting ninja (...). The Real ID thing is more than about privacy. It is about Blizzard losing touch with their users. There is a definitive move towards making Battlenet like Facebook. (...) I know tons of WoW players who despise social networking. (...) They do not play to 'forge real-life' friendships. They play WoW to play a game. Yes, they've made some friends along the way. But that doesn't mean they want to be their friend outside of the game, or even know who they really are. (...)

World of Warcraft is a game. For many (myself included) this is an escape. Here I am not a frazzled, overworked, stressed computer programmer. I am 'Moo', laid back, funny, and oft distracted healer. I like being 'Moo'.

(Mooicusrex, 9 July 2010)

In his or her post, Ranoë refers to the Facebook-based browser game *FarmVille*, a real-time farm management simulation game with up to 80 million players. Due to its simplicity and vacuity, *FarmVille* is not considered to be a serious game in the *WoW* community. While Ranoë's post can be perceived as being rather humorous, Mooicusrex's comment offers a deeper insight into the soul of a *WoW* player.

Mooicusrex points out that many *WoW* players despise social networking sites such as *Facebook*. This aversion, as Mooicusrex explains, is because social networks merge one's online and offline lives. Many *WoW* players prefer the division of these two components, one that the Real ID would have abolished. For Mooicusrex and millions of other *WoW* players, the anonymity they are able to create for themselves within the game offers them the possibility to construct brand new identities. In *WoW*, Mooicusrex is a "laid back" and funny healer and sounds happy when he talks about 'Moo'. Moo's description of his real life reads as grey and grim. For many players, the *WoW* universe is an escape. The realness of the game and its community allows the players to escape the problems and banalities of their everyday lives. In *WoW*, there are no cares, but only endless adventures.

⁸⁵ After the deletion of the original thread, both posts are now available at: <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3624/3006>

In the final chapter on identity performance in *WoW*, I will discuss how the game can serve as an escape from real life problems and analyze some of the consequences that accompany abandoning reality in favor of a game.

3.4 Escaping Reality with a Drug Called *WoW*

When surfing the Internet for *WoW* addiction, one will be quickly find cases of gamers who died after playing the game excessively⁸⁶ or those who lost their job or marriage due to the amount of time they spent in the virtual world. While many of those horror stories are exaggerated, cast the entire *WoW* community in a bad light and cause them to have a bad reputation, the problem deserves further investigation. In this chapter I will analyze why the virtual fantasy world turns into a highly addictive drug that takes over some players' lives.

Unfortunately, video game addiction is part of a class of addictions called process addictions⁸⁷, similar to shopping, eating or sexual activity addictions. Unlike substance addictions, these do not produce a physical dependency. Most people only believe that a person is a true addict if that person's body is addicted to something. If a person claims that he or she is addicted to buying things, eating food or playing video games, most people simply think that this person has a weak mind and could easily quit if they were in the same situation. However, in recent years experts have started to acknowledge the severity of process addictions. In his book *The Heart of Addiction*, Lance Dodes points out that the real addiction is psychological and not physical, saying "physical addiction is neither necessary to nor sufficient for an addiction" (2002: 75). Therefore, the problem of process addictions is that although the actions have a high addiction potential, the severity is underestimated by the public and treatment is much more difficult than substance addictions.

These days, the Internet has led to process addictions including addiction to pornography, gaming or the Internet itself. While an alcoholic or drug addict can be treated by cold detoxification or other methods that prevent them from accessing the relevant substance, the treatment of an Internet-based addiction is much more difficult. Nowadays, it is almost impossible for most young people to spend a single day without using the Internet. To make a person that is addicted to online gaming

⁸⁶ This story was posted by Carmen Ivanov at:
<http://news.softpedia.com/news/Two-Fanatic-World-of-Warcraft-Gamers-Have-Died-Because-Of-WoW-11821.shtml>

⁸⁷ <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Psychological+addiction>

quit his or her addiction while still using the Internet is as difficult as making an alcoholic quit drinking while placing a bottle of vodka on a table in front of them. It only takes one click to be on the next website that offers one's favorite game.

After having established that excessive online gaming is a real addiction, we will now investigate why some players become addicted to *WoW*. For a brief overview of the problem and to better understand the process of becoming addicted to the game, figure 17 shows a forum post made by Maximus, a *WoW* player. Maximus's post shows that a person can become addicted to the game itself, although others may cite external factors that push them towards addiction. Dodes refers to these two addiction factors as "attraction" and "motivation" factors. While attraction factors such as a fascinating storyline or the large community seem to captivate many *WoW* players, motivation factors such as missing family ties or depression can also make a person play the game more excessively. The differentiation between attraction and motivation factors enables us to explain why some people become addicted to *WoW* and others do not. While it is always the easiest solution to blame an addictive substance, a game or tasty food, a person's social surroundings and other private situations may be as responsible for a person's addiction as much as the drug itself. The following post by Maximus demonstrates this very clearly:

How it started

It started before the game was even out. To escape my life I used to play the mmo ultimate online but that was nothing serious maybe 2-10 hours a week. When I heard about WoW I logged onto the blizzard website to check out races and class combinations at this time I was an A class student.

So the day came, 3 copies of the game came (2 for my brothers). At first I was only playing a few hours a week. The hours crept up the girl friend started complaining more. I went 2 weeks during the christmas holidays without seeing my gf, I got a text saying that I wasn't spending time with her anymore, she ended the relationship.

I was devastated.. I got hooked, every moment where I didn't have wow I thought about it and to make things worse the game made me more shy at school which in turn made me want to escape to my more comfortable life wow. My parents didn't give a crap they never have, I decided to quit, I did this by purposely breaking my laptop.

A few years later I'm at uni and my friend says that his boss plays wow, until then I'd never heard the game term since I last played. I thought I'd take a look and see how things were. I said to myself this time I will play in moderation! Real life will have the priority... Didn't turn out like that, I dropped out of uni and wasted a whole year of my life. So today I quit wow I sold my account for a reasonable amount of money. I feel like a part of me has died and I shall miss my other life dearly. But when I look at everything that's happened, a lost gf, whole year of university wasted I think too myself - "wtf was I doing?!"

[Login](#) or [register](#) to post comments

 x2

Submitted by Maximus on Fri, 12/25/2009 - 20:46 - [9 Comments](#)

Figure 17. Forum post⁸⁹ by Maximus on *Wowadicts.com*.

There are hundreds of stories of people like Maximus whose situations are quite similar to those of drug addicts. Maximus practically analyzes his own addiction process by describing its individual stages, as well as the accelerators and consequences of his addiction. At the beginning of his dependency, Maximus was a good student who started to “experiment” with online games in order to escape his arduous life. While he initially only played a few hours a week, his playing time quickly increased. Eventually he got “hooked” to the game, constantly thinking about his next log in. His grades plummeted, his girlfriend left him and he felt uncomfortable in social situations. With “the drug” always close by, he had to destroy his computer in order to get rid of the source that he believed caused his addiction. However, only a few years later, when he once again was confronted with the game, he relapsed. Although Maximus realizes what caused his behavior and that real life should have priority, his cravings for playing the game became stronger. Nevertheless, he was

⁸⁹ <http://www.wowaholics.org/content/how-it-started>

able to beat his addiction by selling his *WoW* account⁹⁰, including his avatar and the rest of his *WoW* identity. Maximus describes that when he sold his account, he felt like a part of him died. For many *WoW* addicts, the disposal of their accounts seems to be the only solution to beat the addiction. By ridding themselves of the account, they do not only sell a virtual video game character, but also a very real part of their identity that they will never get back.

We will now explore the attraction and motivation factors that can cause an addiction to *WoW* and subsequently analyze the influence that an addiction will have on a player's identity.

At the beginning of his post, Maximus writes a very important sentence: "It started before the game was even out". Although Maximus says he was already playing *Ultimate Online*, a game with a structure similar to *WoW*, there can also be a more profound interpretation of his statement. At this very moment, more than nine million people are logged into the *WoW* servers and only a few of them are addicted to the game. Thus, there are likely specific reasons why a particular person will become addicted to the game while another person will not. Studies on addiction have revealed that there are certain tendencies that lead to addiction. Burhus explains that a "person that becomes addicted goes into the game with the addictive personality already in place. The game merely allows free reign of the personality" (2002: n.p.).

After reading the post, it seems like Maximus has a rather addictive personality because of how quick and strong his addiction progressed. In addition to an addictive personality, attraction and motivation factors contribute to the development of a person's dependency. Maximus mentions is that he is unhappy with his life and uses the game to escape to an online comfort zone, which reflects one of the attraction factors of *WoW*. The game offers a perfect fantasy world in which players do not have to fear any real world problems or consequences to their actions. Furthermore, this behavior also reflects a motivation factor. Maximus also gets "hooked" to the game and spends more in the virtual world because he is neglected by his family and deserted by his girlfriend. Yee explains that many addicted players experience "a sense of feeling trapped in their circumstances, or a sense that they have no control over their own lives" (2002: 13). This motivation factor makes the troubled individual

⁹⁰ Within *WoW*, accounts can be sold to or traded with other players. However, many players frown upon this behavior, because they think it contradicts the idea of one's offline identity merging with one's online identity.

want to play the game with more intensity. The attraction factor that correlates with this motivation factor is that the game offers a greater amount of control that a player is able to have over his decisions and actions. Suddenly, a player who feels insignificant in real life can achieve great things and will be admired for his or her abilities. A person who is pushed around at work by his or her colleagues and superiors is able to lead a group of warriors or a whole guild within *WoW*. The game enables its players to make significant decisions and earn psychological rewards that they might not be able to experience in real life. The feeling that a person is starting to have real control over his or her life is supported by the “leveling up” concept of *WoW*. Every time a player gains enough XPs by killing enemies or completing quests, his avatar will reach the next level and its skills and equipment can be upgraded, providing the players with a concrete goal. Knowing they have to play a few hours to earn enough XPs in order to reach the next level creates the feeling that players have control over their lives. This goal, on the other hand, is just like a cliffhanger at the end of a chapter in a book – after reaching a new level, an addicted player immediately wants to reach the next level. Similar to somebody who does not manage to sleep at night because he or she is reading a thrilling book, a *WoW* player may forget the time around him or her and play consecutive days and nights in order to reach the next level. Nevertheless, while completing an entire book usually does not take more than a couple nights, reaching the final level in *WoW* can take months.

The virtual universe of *WoW* also serves as a motivation factor for some because it serves as an outlet for stress and frustration. When grades in school are bad, conflict with parents arises or a romantic partner has just ended the relationship, one can simply avoid all of their problems by “immersing oneself in a make-believe world” (Yee: 14).

Not only is *WoW* able to increase a player’s self-esteem, but it can also improve his or her self-image. As has been already discussed in the previous two chapters, *WoW* enables the players to detach their minds from their physical appearance. All of a sudden, a corpulent player can be slim, a short player can be tall, a bald player can have hair or a player bound to a wheelchair is able to walk.

James Cameron’s motion picture *Avatar* deals with this exact circumstance. In the movie, a crippled soldier is forced to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair after

being wounded in combat. With the help of modern technology, he is able to control the avatar's real life mind and body. After a month of being this avatar, the soldier refuses to return to his real body. He has grown so accustomed to his new legs that he despises the idea of having to experience the limitations of his dysfunctional body ever again. While the soldier's own body degenerates due to the lack of food and exercise, his avatar becomes a hero and loved by a woman. At the end, the soldier is able to switch irrecoverably into the avatar's body and leave his crippled body behind.

It is not difficult to imagine that a similar development would be a dream come true for many *WoW* players who are unhappy with their own lives. Burhus explains that the addictive personality "goes into the game depressed, socially isolated, and possibly with a poor self body image. Being able to create a better "self" is an excellent way to get the addict to start playing the game" (2002: n.p.).

As Burhus mentions, players who become addicted to the game are very often socially isolated. Maximus's parents, for example, neglect him and later, as a consequence of his emerging addiction, his girlfriend leaves him. Because *WoW* enables a small social network and communication among other players, a motivation factor to continue playing is present. Ducheneaut et al. point out that many of the features offered by *WoW* and other MMORPGs, such as creating a character or fighting enemies, are also available in similar single player games (2006:1). However, the addiction potential of games that lack the presence of other players seems to be insignificant compared to the potential of MMORPGs. Therefore, what seems to provide further breeding ground for one's addiction is the game's social component. To truly understand this phenomenon of communicating with complete strangers online, we have to analyze how the Internet has changed the ways in which we socialize.

Since the beginning of humanity, people have preferred to stay in groups. The company of others gave our ancestors, the hunters and gatherers, greater security against the dangers of the wild as well as the possibility to hunt larger enemies. The presence of other humans generated warmth on a cold day in a clammy cave and gave mental strength to cope with the darkest day. As mankind started to live in single-family houses, humans started to meet in town squares, churches and markets. Postmodernity, however, has changed the meeting habits of humans and

the Internet has pushed some into the solitude of their houses. Many people have stopped going to church and have started to acquire many goods from online warehouses like *eBay* or *Amazon*. Furthermore, many of us talk to our friends or family via our laptops, smartphones or tablets. The Internet has moved an increasing number of outdoor activities into our homes – for example, we can order food, clothing and books online and have them brought to our doorstep. Even our education has started to become outsourced to the Internet. We have begun to communicate with others by typing short messages into chat boxes of our social networks and messenger services. Communication has become something that we do along the way instead of a main focal point of our daily lives. Several chat windows can be opened simultaneously, enabling us to communicate with more than one person at a time. We use our technology to communicate when we are at home, in class, at work, at the movies, in a café or even while talking to another person in the same room. It seems that, in recent years, smartphones have drastically increased the amount of communication, but while people seem to communicate more, the quality of it seems to have declined rapidly. What is more, the new technology allows us to grow lonelier. Even though we can communicate with a person that lives across the world, we seem to estrange ourselves from the people that live right next to us. Recent studies have revealed that an increasing number of people live in single-person households. In Germany alone, the amount of people living by themselves has increased by 4,5 million⁹¹ in the last 20 years. Our mobile phones and Internet connections enable us to leave our “life in the herd” behind. We no longer need to go outside to satisfy our socializing needs – the town squares, churches and markets have been rebuilt online. Many people meet in social networks, in forums, on content-sharing sites and on gaming platforms to talk to others. This is also the reason why *MMORPGs* are so popular: they enable us to escape into a fantasy world for long hours without even feeling remotely lonely. However, whenever an addicted player shuts off of his or her screen and returns to the real world, he or she eventually has to realize that real life relationships have been neglected and that some friends have moved on. Consequently, the need to log back into the game and meet one’s online “friends” grows stronger every time the person realizes there is no one in the real world to whom they may return.

⁹¹http://www.welt.de/newsticker/dpa_nt/infoline_nt/brennpunkte_nt/article108261060/Mehr-Scheidungen-mehr-Single-Haushalte.html

People can also become addicted to their virtual social networks because communicating with others can strongly boost a person's self-esteem. *Facebook* users, as well as *WoW* players, create perfect versions of themselves. Obviously, the comments that a person receives about their ideal self will differ from what the person will get about their possibly flawed, but real, self. To understand this process somewhat better, I will again refer to Goffman's concept of identity performance.

A player's audience in *WoW* is, unlike one's audience on *Facebook*, anonymous. Most players do not know much about the people they play with every day, including their looks, real name or even gender. However, players know exactly how many others surround them. Each time a player logs onto *WoW* he or she is presented with a list of all of the players currently present on the server. This list, as well as seeing other avatars walk around the virtual world, creates the feeling of a constant audience. This audience, as Goffman explains, is an integral part of every performance. What reason is there to perform, if there is no one to watch and assess the performance? Ducheneaut et al. explain that MMORPGs like *WoW* are, in essence, reputation-building games (2006). In *WoW*, players can generate status through the experience level of their avatar or the "epicness"⁹² of their weaponry, armor other powerful items that their avatars have. Without an audience, the game would be meaningless to many players. The appearance of one's avatar and the admiration and recognition from other players are essential for the player's identity construction. By performing idealized versions of themselves, a *WoW* player's identity performance is very similar to that of a *Facebook* user. The fact that it is much easier to be popular and respected in the virtual world than in the real world causes many players to prefer the former to the latter. While status, respect and popularity can take years to develop in the real world, the same thing can be accomplished in a few months in the virtual world. Ducheneaut et al. suggest people become addicted to MMORPGs because they are growing too accustomed to the image that other people have of them. It is not difficult to envision that a player who has a powerful avatar and is respected and admired for his or her achievements chooses the virtual world over a world in which he or she might only experience neglect, disinterest or antipathy.

⁹² Epicness is a term frequently used by *WoW* players. The Urban Dictionary defines it as "something that is so amazing that no other word is able to describe its awesomeness." <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=epicness>>

Another social attraction factor of *WoW*, besides its omnipresent audience, is the guild. Guilds are places where players form relationships to others and where most of the communication takes place. They range in size from only a few players to several hundred (Ducheneaut et al. 2006). In a way, guilds can be compared to a football club. A few days a week, all guild members meet at a certain place and time to hone their skills. They kill smaller enemies and achieve easier tasks to increase their experience levels. On other days, guild members meet for a big game, in which they have to use all of their strength and skills to defeat bigger and mightier opponents. When not practicing or playing, many guild members hang around, joke and make small talk in the private guild forum. Similar to a football club, if a person misses a practice or game, he or she will be sanctioned. Reeves et al. point out that using sanctions put social pressure on guild members (2005). Ducheneaut et al., whose research has revealed that guild members play more than others, supports this social pressure theory. Raids, when members of a guild fight opponents, can last several hours. If a raid starts and ends at a certain time, all guild members have to be present during that period. Many players prepare a small storage of energy drinks and snacks so they can endure the time-consuming battles that very often start in the early evening and stretch deep into the night.

In this chapter I have analyzed why people become addicted to *World of Warcraft*. I don't believe MMORPGs can be blamed for player addictions because it would be similar to blaming first-person shooting games⁹³ for the actions of a person responsible for a school shooting⁹⁴. Although people who play first-person shooters can become addicted kill other people, I believe it is often a correlation. Attraction factors of the games are not the main reasons for a person's addiction or behavior; instead, motivation factors created by that person's private situation are often responsible. Video games do not have the power to influence the direction a person's life is heading, but they can accelerate the pace a person walks in that direction.

Yee's research has revealed that players who consider themselves "failures" in real life are more likely to become addicted to *WoW*. Similar to dreams at night, video

⁹³ In first-person shooters like *Counter Strike*, *Call of Duty* or *Half Life*, the player views the action from the perspective of the protagonist. The goal of the game is to kill as many opponents as possible.

⁹⁴ In the wake of a series of school shootings in the USA and other countries, parents and some experts started to blame first-person shooter video games for the actions of the killers.

games offer an escape. For only a few hours every night, every one of us is traveling in a fantasy world in which worries and problems are limited. While most of us are happy wake up in the morning and start anew, some would rather continue dreaming and stay in their fantasy world. A few of these people become addicted to *WoW*.

Players with a *WoW* addiction may have one because the reasons why they first played the game intensified. Due to the fact that one can easily switch between the virtual world and real world, a person unhappy with his or her life might always be directly confronted with his or her flaws. A person that has created the perfect online identity for him or herself will always be disappointed if he or she has to return to this dull and abhorred real life identity. Like the soldier in Cameron's *Avatar*, many addicted players would prefer to stay in Azeroth forever and create their own reality online where they are members of a large peer group, have a high status and are liked by many. Although addicted teenagers have to understand they are damaging the development process of their real life identities by moving their life online, a complete abstinence from the game and community may not benefit a teen's identity development. In particular, socially isolated teenagers might run the risk of losing their only source of negotiating identities. Sara Allison, a psychologist who treated a teenage boy addicted to an MMORPG, explains that "total abstinence from games would rob Mr. A of his most meaningful form of peer group interaction as well as the opportunity to develop a more consolidated sense of who he is" (2006: 383). She also notes that spending an excessive amount of time on the Internet might serve as a way of "avoiding intimacy with peers and the expansion of his identity in the outside world" (384).

Therefore, when consumed moderately, MMORPGs can become a great source for identity exploration and development. Players are able to experience aspects of their identity that they would not be able to investigate in the real world. However, if consumed excessively, MMORPGs can hinder and endanger the development of one's offline identity. In the end, one's teenage years should also be a time when he or she is hanging around with his or her real life friends and exploring his or her sexual identity. As Maximus posted, playing the game excessively made him "even more shy at school", and prevented him from communicating with other real life males and members of the opposite sex. Therefore, an addiction to *WoW* or other MMORPGs can possibly slow down the development of a player's offline identity.

3.5 Discussing *WoW* Identity

In the previous four chapters, I have used *World of Warcraft* to explain certain behaviors of individuals that can be observed all over the anonymous part of the Internet. I have chosen this particular game as a representative for a very vast area because it unifies many crucial aspects of identity performances that are fueled by unlimited anonymity. The Internet allows its users to reveal hidden and sometimes darker aspects about their identities without feeling guilt or shame. Many experts believe that when a person drags his or her secret identities out of their unconsciousness, he or she experiences his or her true identity. In my thesis, I want to refer to this “true identity” as the *WoW* identity because it is a component of the *Digital Generation*. Although young and old play *WoW*, my research and personal assessment of the situation have revealed that a player’s age influences the way a player performs his or her identity in the game. Younger players are more open to interacting with the *WoW* community and faster to reveal hidden aspects of their identity. I also believe younger players are less constricted when it comes to imagining new identities. Due to their age and existing insecurities about their identities, however, younger players will need a greater validation of the identities they are performing online.

Revealing one’s *WoW* identity, therefore, enables members of the *Digital Generation* to explore and experiment with possible versions of their self. A young person who might be shy and inhibited is given the opportunity to experience versions of his or her self that differ completely from that person’s everyday self. All of a sudden, this person may notice that he or she is able to communicate with others in a more relaxed manner and be a stronger and more confident person. Furthermore, a player’s *WoW* identity does not only reflect his or her true self, but also that player’s idealized self, which could lead to personal development

Finally, I will compare the *Facebook* Identity to the *WoW* identity. I will uncover their similarities and differences, and, most importantly, I will explain how they influence the *Digital Generation*’s sense and experience of identity.

Conclusion

I focused my analysis on the identity construction that takes place during adolescence, because it is during those years that most of us undergo some sort of identity crisis. During puberty, our identities are most vulnerable and undergo constant modifications. Teenagers no longer see their family as a main source for developing their own identities, but turn towards their peer groups. It is in those groups that adolescents acquire social competence, explore their sexual identities and negotiate values, tastes and ideals. In a time before the Internet, these processes took place in small and enclosed social circles. Social networks, however, have taken control over these rather clumsy procedures of exploring and experimenting and moved them from a secure private setting to public stages and caused adolescents to change the way they represent and discover their identities. Nevertheless, the Internet also provided its users with the possibility to stay completely anonymous while interacting with other people. This circumstance gives teenagers, in particular, the possibility to try out identities, which are nonconventional and viewed as “uncool” by their peer groups.

What *Facebook* and *World of Warcraft* have in common is that they enable the idealization of identities. In both networks, users are given the possibility to carefully construct identities, which are more flawless and admirable than their real life identities could ever be. However, what distinguishes the respective idealization processes is the different proximity that the networks have on the reality of adolescents. The identities created on *Facebook* are very similar to identities created in real life although people tend to “clean up” their identities by removing aspects of their identities that they do not like. The problem with this form of idealization is that it can quickly lead to people obsessing over their self-image. Another problem with identity performance on *Facebook* is that people try to individualize their identities. The postmodern identity in general is about creating a unique look, image and lifestyle for oneself. This is what Lady Gaga, Lil’ Wayne, LeBron James and endless other celebrities have been teaching this generation. However, creating individuality is an almost impossible undertaking on the Internet. Everything that is new, cool and unique is immediately adopted by millions of other users that want to be new, cool and unique. This thesis has shown that by increases the level of standardization

(language, style, poses and overall identity), the *Facebook* identity is a collective identity rather than an individual one.

Contrarily, in the *WoW* community, the identity formation process follows a completely different path. Although adolescents in this network are also deeply concerned with the question of who they are and who they want to be, they are able to explore this question in a very different manner. When people want to idealize their identities in *WoW*, they choose heroic names and create mighty avatars. Furthermore, people are given the opportunity to explore and reveal aspects of their identity that they feel uncomfortable about. *WoW* gives young people the opportunity to step away from the social pressure of constantly trying to be cool and fit in. *WoW* enables its users to finally drop their masks and reveal aspects of their true selves. Such a place is especially important for teenagers because they are able to show others how they really perceive themselves. It is here that a person can leave aside their makeup or on-purpose behavior and simply present a genuine version of themselves. Furthermore, people's "negative" and "nonconventional" aspects of their identities can be validated by others in this anonymous space, which is important in the consolidating and acceptance process of learning about the self.

This thesis also showed that, with *Facebook*, a teenager's status within his or her peer group can be transferred from the offline into the online world. Those people who are popular in real life will also be popular in the virtual one. I have noted how the *Facebook* wall enables users to visually present their cultural capital; that is, post cultural texts that make them look "cool" among their friends. Large amounts of cultural capital will increase a person's social capital (friends), an equation that can be applied to any schoolyard or social networks on the Internet. On *WoW*, however, these numbers do not add up, because its players enjoy complete anonymity. Status on *WoW* is generated through the skills of the individual player. If we leave the scoreboard aside, everybody is equal on *WoW*. In this anonymous environment, there simply is no race, class, gender or appearance that could influence the construction of a person's identity. These attributes exist in *WoW*, however, a person is able to change his or her affiliation with these concepts. Since the beginning of the Internet, people have used its anonymity to try out radically new and completely unconventional identities. Experimenting with identities helps people approach aspects of their identities that they would have never been able to experience in the

real world. People who want to try out uncommon identities will often be confronted with intolerance and lack of understanding. Be it on *Facebook* or in the schoolyard, adolescents particularly look down on people whose identities differ from the established norms. In *WoW*, peer pressure evaporates and everybody can finally construct a version of themselves that is much closer to their true self. What is more, putting on new masks enables teenagers to experience how identities are constructed. They are given the opportunity to understand how our society constructs stereotypical versions of males and females. This gives the adolescents the possibility to question these constructs and, subsequently make up their own mind about what it means to be a man or a woman.

There are two main reasons why I analyzed *Facebook* and *World of Warcraft*. The first would be that both are deeply rooted in the lives of many members of the *Digital Generation*. Furthermore, and even more importantly, only by contrasting these two virtual realities with each other, is it possible to truly grasp the processes going on within them. Only by experiencing how relieving complete anonymity is, are we able to understand how absurd some of the actions of people placed on a public stage can be.

There is no doubt that the *Digital Generation* is a very competent generation. Its members are great at mastering knowledge about new media and are very open to trying new things. The *Digital Generation* is a global generation networked around the world that is more familiar with different cultures and is developing a greater tolerance towards race, class and gender. However, there are also some aspects about this generation that should concern parents, authorities, and leaders. Today's adolescents are able to choose from so many different identities, some of which may have the possibility to be more unstable than those of previous generations. While the online identities are rather solid, the offline identities seem to become weaker. Many *Facebook* users, as well as *WoW* players, tend to get obsessed with the self-created, idealized identities in virtual reality. The realization that those flawless identities cannot be transferred into the real world has the ability to push adolescents into an identity crisis that should not be underestimated.

Furthermore, I'd like to cast support to experts discussing *Generation Me*. As casting shows and celebrity hype become more popular, some members of this generation have started to assume that a person is only worthy if they receive fame

and attention. Regardless of the price they may later pay, many teenagers scream for attention with every post they make on *Facebook*. While it seems like nobody is listening to them in the real world, they have many “forced” listeners on the social network.

At this point I want to note that I have only shown two areas that allow the performance of identity on the Internet. The World Wide Web is such a vast network with so many different websites to visit that it would be impossible to analyze all of those platforms that allow the construction of identity.

Furthermore, I need to mention that I had to omit the investigation of an important field of research. Space constraints of this thesis did not allow the analysis of what is known as “*cyberbullying*”. Cyberbullying is a new form of psychological harassment and intimidation that takes place on the Internet and is particularly common among adolescents. A recent suicide by a young girl⁹⁵, caused by the back-breaking force of cyberbullying, illustrates that this kind of behavior is becoming more frequent in our society, especially on social networking sites. However, due to the complexity of this topic, I have decided to leave it out of my analysis. Without a doubt, it is a circumstance that requires much more attention from parents, teachers, experts and the media.

⁹⁵ The 15-year-old Amanda Todd committed suicide after her classmates bullied her on *Facebook* over the course of several months. After Amanda had sent a nude picture to a stranger on the Internet, the photography was quickly spread on *Facebook* and became the catalyst for harassment and intimidation.

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German Abstract

In der vorliegenden Diplomarbeit geht es darum, die Art und Weise aufzuzeigen, wie sich Jugendliche im Web 2.0 Identitäten konstruieren. Als Arbeitsgrundlage dienten mir das Netzwerk *Facebook* und das online Rollenspiel *World of Warcraft*. Eine Analyse dieser beiden virtuellen Welten soll aufzeigen, dass insbesondere junge Menschen verstärkt das Internet nutzen um bestimmte Aspekte ihrer Identitäten darzustellen, öffentlich zu machen und gegebenenfalls auch zu verändern.

Im theoretischen Teil dieser Arbeit wird darauf hingewiesen, dass die Identität eines jeden Menschen als etwas Multiples, sowie Form- und Veränderbares angesehen wird. Grundsätzlich wird davon ausgegangen, dass die meisten Menschen nicht ihr wahres Ich zur Schau stellen, sondern dieses hinter den unterschiedlichsten Masken bzw. Rollen verbergen. Bei der näheren Beschäftigung mit den oben genannten Netzwerken wird offensichtlich, dass, je nach sozialer Situation, die Beteiligten nicht nur ihre Masken wechseln, sondern ihre jeweiligen Identitäten gleich mit. Es werden verschiedene Rollen eingenommen, mit Hilfe derer unterschiedliche Aspekte der angestrebten Identitäten hervorgehoben oder versteckt werden können. Mit *Facebook* und *World of Warcraft* wurden zwei dieser sozialen und kulturellen Darstellungsformen ausgewählt, in denen vor allem Mitglieder der *Digitalen Generation* unterwegs sind. Beide Netzwerke erlauben es eben jener Generation, also Menschen, die in das Internetzeitalter hineingeboren wurden, mit den unterschiedlichsten Identitäten zu experimentieren.

Jene virtuellen Identitäten, welche auf *Facebook* konstruiert werden, orientieren sich sehr stark an den realweltlichen Identitäten der Jugendlichen. In diesem sozialen Netzwerk treffen sich die jungen Menschen mit ihren Freunden aus dem echten Leben und erleben eine virtuelle Welt, welche sich in ihrer Darstellung kaum von ihren offline Realitäten unterscheidet. Ein wichtiges Unterscheidungsmerkmal dieser beiden Welten liegt jedoch darin, dass die Asynchronität der hier stattfindenden Kommunikation den Benutzern eine Idealisierung ihrer Identitäten erlaubt. Fotos können bearbeitet und geschriebene Worte können korrigiert werden, bevor sie auf den Online-Profilen der Jugendlichen erscheinen. Auf diese Weise

werden die negativen Aspekte der eigenen Identität minimiert und die positiven verstärkt. Für viele Benutzer von *Facebook* ist dieses virtuelle Makeup von großer Bedeutung, da sie in diesem Netzwerk dem prüfenden Blick des gesamten Freundeskreises permanent ausgesetzt sind. Die ständige und konsequente Öffentlichmachung des eigenen Handelns erhöht den vermeintlichen sozialen Druck durch die Gleichaltrigen enorm.

Auf der Spielplattform *World of Warcraft* nimmt die Konstruktion der eigenen Identitäten ganz andere Züge an. Zwar werden auch in dieser Umgebung Identitäten verschönert und idealisiert, jedoch erlaubt der anonyme Charakter der *WoW*-Gemeinschaft die Erforschung von noch ganz anderen, bis daher unbekanntem Identitäten. In diesem Netzwerk verstecken die Spieler ihre Identitäten aus dem echten Leben hinter heroischen Spitznamen und mächtigen Avataren. Die hier vorhandene Anonymität macht somit die Spieler und ihre realweltlichen Identitäten unantastbar. In dieser virtuellen Welt können die Jugendlichen die Person bzw. das Wesen sein, das sie sein möchten. Es gibt keine moralische Instanz oder möglichen gesellschaftlichen Druck, welche dem Identitätswunsch einen Riegel vorschieben. Grenzen werden bei diesem Spiel mit den Identitäten nur von der eigenen Fantasie gesetzt.

Das Ziel dieser Arbeit liegt darin aufzuzeigen, dass das Internet die Konstruktion von noch nie dagewesenen Identitäten erlaubt. Die Facebook Identität und die World of Warcraft Identität werden nebeneinander gestellt und verglichen. Auf was für eine Weise ähneln sich die Identitäten und wie unterscheiden sie sich? Besondere Aufmerksamkeit erhält hierbei auch die Frage, ob und welche Auswirkungen das Spiel mit den virtuellen Identitäten auf die realen Identitäten der Jugendlichen hat.

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