STORIES OF DEPRESSION ON THE INTERNET

Exercise out of Depression subreddit narratives

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Master's thesis in Social Psychology

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ABSTRACT

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Depression is a worldwide concern, therefore the intention was to illustrate the battles people have with depression. Depression is isolating by nature, thus approaching the material through social identity theory (SIT), a concept relating to group belonging, was important. This master's thesis in social psychology investigated how social identities were formed in narratives told by people struggling with depression.

The material was gathered from a subreddit called "Exercise Out Of Depression" (EOOD), where people attempt to recover from depression through physical exercise. Narrative positioning analysis (NPA) was chosen to analyse the produced narratives. NPA examines narratives through three levels of positioning: The characters of the story, the audience, and the self. Having an identity based approach, the use of the concepts in SIT seemed suitable to be used in tandem. Due to the use of identifiers in positioning, a pleasing harmony between NPA and SIT was seemingly present.

It was found that the narrators identify with being depressed as well as exercising out of said identification. An attempt to signify group-belonging with the EOOD subreddit was also found through various wording, such as having been helped through exercise as well as the sharing of common terminology. Although all narratives did still portray an ongoing clash between depression and feeling better through physical exercise.

The method of combining NPA and SIT could work to find other ways of identification on the Internet as well due to the synergy present in said combination. It was concluded that the practical use of self-positioning (NPA) and self-categorisation (SIT and self-categorization theory) were very similar and making a distinction between the two proved difficult, if not impossible.

This thesis provides a qualitative view of people's lives with depression and the struggles they go through coping with it, hopefully bringing further understanding to this mental health issue.

Key words: depression, narrative, narrative positioning analysis, social identity theory, Reddit.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tässä sosiaalipsykologian pro gradu -tutkielmassa tutkittiin masentuneiden kertomuksia internetissä. Masennus on maailmanlaajuisesti eräs suurimmista mielenterveysongelmista, joka voi aiheuttaa mielenterveydellistä haittaa iästä ja kansalaisuudesta riippumatta. Masennus aiheuttaa muun muassa sosiaalista eristäytymistä, joten sosiaalisen identiteetin teoriaa (SIT) käytettiin selvittämään masennuksesta kärsivien ryhmäjäsenyyksiä. Sosiaalisen identiteetin rakentumista puolestaan tarkasteltiin masennuksesta kärsivien kertomuksissa.

Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin urheilun avulla masennuksesta toipumiseen suuntautuneesta keskusteluyhteisöstä (eli subredditistä) "Exercise Out Of Depression" (EOOD). Subredditissä jaetaan omia kokemuksia muiden kanssa sekä pyydetään neuvoa masennusta ja urheilua koskevissa asioissa. Kokemuksia tutkittiin kerronnallisen asemoinnin analyysilla (NPA), jossa on kolme tasoa: Kertomuksen hahmojen, yleisön, sekä kertojan itsensä asemoinnin tasot. Merkittävänä taustatekijänä NPA:ssa on identiteetti, jolloin sen yhdistäminen SIT:aan antaa mahdollisuuden tutkia sosiaalista identiteettiä ja ryhmäjäsenyyksiä kertomuksista.

Tuloksista ilmeni, että kertojat kuvastivat itsensä masentuneiksi. Tämä mahdollisti kuitenkin myös EOOD-subredditin yhteisöön samastumisen esimerkiksi kertomuksen ilmaisuilla sekä pyrkimyksillä pitää urheilurutiineja yllä. Masennukseen liittyvät kamppailut olivat läsnä kertomuksissa, mutta niin oli myös urheilusta koettu parempi hyvinvointi sekä masennuksen osittainen päihittäminen.

NPA:a sekä SIT:aa yhdistämällä aineistosta voi löytää myös muunlaisia identiteettejä. Käytännössä näiden näkökulmien yhdistämisestä havaittiin, että itseasemointi (NPA) sekä itsekategorisointi (SIT sekä itsekategorisoinnin teoria) olivat huomattavan samanlaisia ja niiden erottaminen toisistaan oli haasteellista. NPA:n ja SIT:n yhdistäminen mahdollistaa sosiaalisen identiteetin tutkimuksen liittämisen kerronnalliseen analyysiin. Tutkielma tuottaa laadullista näkemystä ja tietoa mielenterveystekijöistä, masennukseen liittyvistä kamppailuista sekä hyvinvointitekijöistä masennuksessa.

Hakusanat: masennus, kertomus, kerronnallisen asemoinnin analyysi, sosiaalisen identiteetin teoria, Reddit.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Internet connects people from various walks of life and offers everyone equal footing to discuss from. At the same time the Internet has various platforms with communities, entertainment, and information. (Harrison & Thomas, 2009, p. 110; Kirmayer, Raikhel, & Rahimi, 2013, pp. 165–166; Martin, 2016, p. 80.) One does not have to be concerned with their socioeconomic status (as long as they have access to the Internet), or their characteristics because social hierarchy, outward appearances, wold views, and ideologies do not prevent anyone from discussing on the Internet in an anonymous environment (Guzzetti, 2008, p. 457; Kirmayer et al., 2013, p. 166). Even depression, which has been a major part of modern society for decades now and has been on the rise (Hidaka, 2012), has had Internet support groups come about and offer a place to discuss for people suffering from depression. These support groups can offer help to the person suffering from depression and strengthen their social ties through the support the person receives on the Internet, which can have an effect on the quality of life and health experienced by the person in their offline environments (Selfhout, Branje, Delsing, ter Bogt, & Meeus, 2009). This is because the identity a person exhibits and builds on the Internet can portray a person's identity in offline environments as well (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Physical exercise is also seen to reduce the symptoms of, along with the problems caused by, depression (Craft & Perna, 2004), and the Internet can serve as a source of information in this regard. Therefore, I find that it is important to research an Internet environment meant for people suffering from depression that stresses the aspects of both belonging to a group and physical exercise.

In this master's thesis of social psychology, I have used Reddit material gathered in a research collaboration between professor of social psychology Atte Oksanen (University of Tampere) and Dr. David Garcia (Medical University of Vienna). Reddit is an Internet website where people can talk and share their experiences with one another. Interests are divided into subreddits, each one representing a certain topic or interest.[1] The Reddit material displays how people communicate on subreddits, or Internet groups that deal with various topics, some of which are health-related. Of special interest to this thesis is a subreddit that addresses depression, the struggles with depression, and the tools given to combat it through physical exercise. The material consists of texts such as daily struggles with feelings of depression, as well as the difficulty of exercising while constantly combatting oneself and the mental burden of depression. It has accounts of real life struggles with depression, successes and failures, as well as exercise goals set to oneself (or by another) and the achievements related to them.

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[1] https://www.redditinc.com/ (Retrieved May 22nd, 2019)

Of special interest is how people struggling with depression identify themselves in a group, the purpose of which is for the person to exercise while combatting depression, and how they form their social identities. Through their identifications and accounts this master's thesis attempts to examine the type of identification and social identity they portray and build in different segments of their narratives. In order to achieve this I will employ positioning analysis (e.g. Bamberg, 1997). Through the different positions the narrator (i.e. the person writing the story) takes within their narrative, I study what kinds of social identities and self-categories they portray, build, and create. Therefore in a specific part of the narrative I examine whether the narrator has positioned themselves as, for instance, a member of the (Internet) group, as a person suffering from depression, or as a sports enthusiast, among other positions.

This master's thesis is a qualitative study. In it, first, I shall discuss depression in order to give a better understanding of what it is this research paper addresses. Then the relevance exercising has to depression, and how it may be seen as a form of therapy will be argued. The relevance Internet communities have in regards to depression and being depressed will also be addressed. After presenting the relevant approach to depression, I shall present concepts such as social identity theory (SIT), social identification, self-categories, as well as theoretical models explaining Internet behaviour and the identities people adopt on the Internet. First the concept of identity that is relevant to this research paper shall be introduced. Afterwards, the material used in this thesis, as well as the method of analysis, narrative positioning analysis (NPA; e.g. Bamberg, 1997), shall be presented. It is necessary to discuss the topic of epistemological differences as well, which will be quickly discussed before the chapter presenting the method of analysis itself. The fifth chapter will consist of the analyses and results, which will utilise the background theory (SIT) and the method of analysis (NPA), drawing the circle to a close so to speak. The final chapter will discuss and evaluate the concepts, analysis and results of this research paper, as well as open these topics up for further discussion by going over such topics as the relevance of my findings in broader scientific discussion and this research paper in general.

With this master's thesis the aim is to give a better understanding of how people build their online social identities in a forum where they come to discuss exercising out of depression, as well as the importance it may have to these people wherever applicable. Hopefully, with this research, I will be able to further along a better understanding of the social identities people who suffer from depression have and build, and with that, a better understand depression itself. I also argue that an Internet identity is not a separate entity that has no effect on one's "real life" (i.e. offline) identity (e.g. McKenna & Bargh, 1998) and can have "real life" effects on the quality of life the person lives. This

argument will be addressed in the material with the analysis of said material. Throughout the text, I will use the terms CMC (Computer mediated communication), and FtF (Face-to-face communication) as suggested by Christopherson (2007), in place of Internet, or virtual communication, and "real life" communication. Personally, I find the divide between Internet and "real life" communication to be problematic due to the implication that Internet communication is, in reality, hierarchically lower than "real life" communication. In order to properly respect and study the significance of Internet communication, especially from a social identity approach, it is in my opinion imperative to avoid hierarchically classifying Internet communication as "unreal".

The research question is as follows:

How are social identities formed through narrative positioning?

My intention is to analyse the various narrative positions used by the people in EOOD, and how positioning is used to form a social identity online. More specifically, each level of narrative positioning analysis will be scrutinised in order to find the respective social identity formed within the narrative. Simultaneously the social identities themselves acting as a means of enabling narrative positioning, shall be considered, if applicable.

2 DEPRESSION

Depression is discussed both colloquially and medically. For instance Romakkaniemi (2011) argues that the way depression is used colloquially is often confused with the natural reactions and emotions a person has to life events that are unexpected or unusual. Depression is talked about as if it is just a passing mood, but the term depression is in itself a medical term. The medical definitions of depression are used to describe situations where multiple different symptoms arise for a longer period of time. These symptoms include such things as a depressed mood, loss of interest, lack of energy, self-blame, suicidal thoughts, insomnia, and changes in appetite. Having these symptoms is indicative of suffering from medically defined depression. (pp. 34–36; Dimidjian, Martell, Addis, & Herman-Dunn, 2007; Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, Haslam, & Jetten., 2014, p. 216; Marin, 1990.) The 10th edition of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) lists multiple different types of depression. It is important to keep in mind that there is a difference between a depressive episode and recurrent depressive disorder. The former can be defined as mild, moderate or severe, with symptoms ranging from momentary lethargy and apathy to daily activities being stopped, and physiological changes such as weight loss. According to the ICD-10 definition of a depressive episode, the person feels the worst after they wake up, and the severity of the depressive episode can be determined by the amount and impact of the various symptoms the person experiences. The latter, recurrent depressive disorder, is defined as the reoccurrence of depressive episodes for an extended period of time ranging from a few weeks to a few months. Furthermore hypomania, or over activity, as well as a slight yet momentary better mood, may occur in the person suffering from recurrent depressive disorder. (2016, F32–F33.)

Depression is a significant mental health problem in the modern world. As the second most widely spread mental health problem, only a minority receive proper care. Not only do a significant amount of patients suffer from it, but depression is also one of the most common presentation topics for treating health care professionals. (Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 215.) Depression is experienced all over the world (e.g. Chang, Jetten, Cruwys, & Haslam, 2017; Ha et al., 2007), regardless of age (e.g. Selfhout et al., 2009; Ha et al., 2007; Kessler, Lloyd, Lewis, & Gray, 1999). It can be expressed differently depending on the surrounding culture of the person. For instance depression can have more somatic symptoms than psychological ones among Chinese people in comparison to Australians (Chang et al., 2017). Suffering from depression is not tied to merely certain nations and age groups. It could be considered fairly universal. An important point to consider here is that not all people experience and live with depression the same way. The experience of depression depends on the person. It is a unique experience affected by one's environment. (Romakkaniemi, 2011, p. 3.) One

thing is very common among people suffering from depression, though: That it is "an illness of isolation" (Karp, 2016, p. 7).

In the next subchapter I shall delve further into some of the factors that cause depression and how it affects people.

2.1 Causes and effects

There are numerous reasons why and how people get depressed. To cover them all would be an immense undertaking, even impossible to list without error. There are some general factors though that do contribute to the onset of depression. Of note here is that I will not be discussing biological factors contributing to depression (such as genes). As a matter of fact, making any type of educated guess on that topic would be impossible from the material I shall present later. The approach here is more in line with social psychological interests such as social environments and group interaction. So what are these general factors that could play into the onset of depression and how they affect a person?

An important factor could be the situation a person is in. Situations often affect when a person becomes depressed. Hardships, the use of narcotics, loneliness, losses, crises, and so on, are just some of the reasons why a person could start suffering from depression. The unfortunate consequence of living in these situations can cause and be caused by problems interacting with other people as well as a loss of self. (Romakkaniemi, 2011, pp. 38–39.) Depression, then, wouldn't become merely *localised* in the sense that it would only affect an individual at a personal level. It would become a part of the experienced social world a person lives in, hence becoming a stigmatising effect, or considered as such. (Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 215.) This in turn can even worsen the feelings of depression, that is, the person suffering from depression would feel even more displaced (Wolpert, 2001), as well as suffer more from attributing failure as a part of themselves, while attributing success as a part of other people (Cruwys, South, Greenaway, & Haslam, 2015, p. 66). This point is important because being socially intertwined with other people is a major part of not feeling depressed. As Cruwys et al. (2014, p. 215) put it: "depression is a fundamentally social disorder, with reduced social connectedness implicated as a cause, symptom, and target for treatment of depression."

The effects of depression do not end there. Feelings of inadequacy or incapability are also things people suffering from depression struggle with (Beck et al., 1979, p. 5; Zheng, Sun, Qiao, & Liu, 2009). Furthermore future aspirations can also be at risk due to difficulties in keeping track of them. This can be explained through a loss of a person's "narrative", leading to negatively biased, disorderly

views of one's own "life-events", future and past. (Romakkaniemi, 2011, p. 41.) Further complications come about with relapses back into depression, which happen even if a person suffering from depression is receiving proper care (Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 215). People who fall into the clinical definitions of depression may feel "miserable, apathetic and self-critical" and socially withdrawn, among other cognitive and behavioural issues (p. 216).

Depression itself can be considered a stigmatising effect, but at the same time depression can be caused by concealed personal identities that are considered stigmas in prevalent society (McKenna & Bargh, 1998, p. 693). So not only can stigmatised identities cause depression, depression itself can create further stigmatisation within prevalent society. Schumm, Koucky, and Bartel (2014) argue this by presenting a case study of trauma survivors suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In their study they argue how negative attitudes towards the trauma survivors, within their social environments, is harmful for their recuperation. One argument is that people within the social environments of the trauma survivors, do not comprehend the severity of the survivors' situation nor experiences. The study found that there are more negative reactions to PTSD and its symptoms than positive reactions. This in turn becomes akin to a domino-effect, where a trauma survivor suffering from PTSD receives negative reactions from their social environments to their symptoms, causing depression related to PTSD to worsen, leading to further issues. (Schumm et al., 2014.)

As to the reasons why people would react negatively, or more accurately, why they would distance themselves socially from people with depression, Knesebeck, Angermeyer, Kofahl, Makowski, and Mnich (2014) offer one possible explanation: Education level. They found that people with lower education levels had a much more prevalent habit of distancing themselves socially from people with depression. A lack of understanding, stereotypical views, generalisations, and so on, were all related to the increase in social distance from a depression sufferer. (Knesebeck et al., 2014.) Interestingly, in Elliott and Frank's (1990) experimental study, it was found that people with an outer appearance portraying a disability were treated more favourably by their social surroundings than those who did not appear to have such features, even though both were suffering from depression. The authors argued that this could be due to a *kindness norm*, where people who have a disability get treated more kindly than those without one. In other words, it could be seen as a way to forgive people with features considered as disabilities for exhibiting depressive symptoms. Whereas for people who do not have such features, it would be more unforgivable since it could be interpreted as a case of *what possible reason could you have!?* (Elliott & Frank, 1990.) By now it is clear that there are of course numerous reasons to have depression. After understanding depression's causes and effects, the next step is to discuss how depression can be treated.

2.2 Treating depression

There are numerous ways to treat depression. The intention in this master's thesis is not to compile a definitive list of the various ways people are treated, nor to make a statement on which methods work, or are the best at treating depression. Some treatment methods will of course be discussed, especially ones that are topically relevant. Most important of which is exercise. Studies have found that exercising has positive effects on depression. In other words, people suffering from depression can feel and cope better with their depression when they exercise. (Craft & Perna, 2004.) One of the reasons for this increase in mood can be that exercise helps people feel accomplishment and capability (Morrissy, 2011), which, as was previously covered, is often lacking among people suffering from depression (e.g. Beck et al., 1979, p. 5; Zheng et al., 2009).

Another topically relevant treatment method is the effect social interaction can have, which has in fact been used to treat those suffering from depression (Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 216). Although, following up on the point of relapses made in the previous subchapter, the possibility of relapsing back into a depressive episode during one's lifetime is still high. As Cruwys et al. (2014) put it: "Even among patients who receive the gold-standard treatment—comprising a combination of antidepressant medication and cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)—25% are expected to relapse within 2 years." (Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 215.) Regardless, it is still important to treat depression, and one way to do so are positive attributions in a person's social identity. People suffering from depression attribute negatively in self-evaluation, whereas they attribute positively when evaluating others. Through this ingenious realization, it has been noted that by moving the focus from the individual to the social identity (i.e. relevant social group), people suffering from depression can be more resilient towards stressful situations as well as understand that failures are not necessarily the person's own fault. The term "restructuring" has been used to define how social identity allows people to make such drastic changes in their attribution style. (Cruwys et al., 2015.)

Another discovery on how to alleviate depressive states comes from a research paper by Selfhout et al. (2009) who studied the effects of Internet use among those suffering from depression. In their research, they found that discussing matters online with other people had positive effects on those suffering from depression. Interestingly enough, it had to be online discussing specifically that had the positive effect, since merely surfing the web, or "visiting websites on the Internet for non-communication purposes" (p. 820), had the opposite effect. This can be explained through "long-term

gratification" (p. 820), and how merely surfing the Internet for unsocial reasons could lead to other issues such as Internet addiction, anxiety, and increase experienced depression. Communicating online on the other hand gives those who partake in it a sense of social activity, offering ways to contact each other even when not physically with one another. This in turn helped prevent or lessen depressive episodes or the feelings related to depression. (Selfhout et al., 2009.) The research focused on adolescents in their teens, but this should not be taken as a way to discredit the results nor the effect the Internet can have on depression depending on the type of activity. Similar results have been found in Dieris-Hirche et al. (2017), for instance, where Internet addiction among depressed adults only worsened the depression itself, and in Bessière, Pressman, Kiesler and Kraut (2010), where using the Internet for communication purposes (e.g. with family) helped alleviate depression among depressed adults.

As can be seen, the treatment approaches presented here are fairly limited. There are no references to psychotherapy, psychological treatment methods, and so on, aside from the quick mention of cognitive behavioural therapy (Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 215). This is not a statement as to the effectiveness of these approaches, nor is it implied that the methods listed here are in any way better. The presented methods in this subchapter are merely here to narrow down the methods relevant to the research material, and give background knowledge on the topics of social identity, exercise, the Internet, and depression. This background knowledge hopefully allows the reader to first understand why the topics were chosen and second, help in understanding the logic behind the following chapter(s) and results from analysis.

I will remark that while this research paper focuses on the positive aspects of belonging to an Internet group, there are studies that show how the use of the Internet may in fact cause people to feel more depressed (e.g. Ha et al., 2007; Rafla, Carson, & DeJong, 2014; Selfhout et al., 2009). Kirmayer et al. (2013) argue that the Internet can both cause deviations in mental health as well as alleviate them. Things such as a better understanding of one's own social surroundings, educating oneself, as well as risks involving privacy and a person's freedom, are just some of the effects the Internet could have on a person. (pp. 165–166.) On the one hand things such as Internet shopping can help people suffering from Internet addiction to feel less depressed (Kuss, Griffiths, & Binder, 2013), whereas on the other hand, the Internet alone can cause people such as adolescents to be more susceptible to things such as cyberbullying, which could cause depression (Kim et al., 2017; Recupero, 2010). One of the key factors playing into depression from Internet use, though, seems to stem from Internet addiction (e.g. Morrison & Gore, 2010). It would stand to reason that a person suffering from an addiction would become depressed doing the addictive thing (as is usually the case, e.g. Kim et al.,

2017; Şanlier, Türközü & Toka, 2016). On the other hand, this line of argument would not contradict using the Internet as a means of recovery or self-therapy for depression, as has been covered before (e.g. Selfhout et al., 2009).

While the exact effect the Internet has on depression sufferers is debatable, the current research material does not answer the question of whether or not the depression of the Internet users has worsened because of Internet communication. The question is irrelevant to this master's thesis, as I am merely interested in seeing how people identify and build their Internet identities online, in a group meant for people exercising out of depression. Whether or not the Internet does more harm than good for people suffering from depression, cannot be answered in this research paper. That is "up-for-grabs" to whomever wants to research the topic. Analysing narratives as a means of identifying online will have to suffice for now.

3 SOCIAL IDENTITY OVERVIEW

When discussing identity in the field of social psychology, one would be hard-pressed not to approach said concept through the theory of social identity (SIT) (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010, p. 47). Social identity is considered to be an individual's social self-concept, which Turner and Oakes (1986) refer to as "the system of cognitive representations of self based upon comparisons with other people and relevant to social interaction" (p. 239). Social identity theory does not dispute the existence of a personal identity, rather it functionalises the role of identity in social contexts as well as challenges more traditional psychological ways of viewing identity. Psychological processes are not limited to the inside of one's head, psychological processes and functions extend to group processes that exist outside the individual mind. Instead of viewing the group as a collection of individual identities, as if thrown into a blender and then just pouring out whatever is left of these identities, social identity theory sees social situations in a more functional yet less assuming manner. (Cruwys et al., 2014; Turner & Oakes, 1986, pp. 239–241.)

Instead of referring to individuals as agents that function outside their social environments, their society, individuals and society are seen as if they were inseparable. It would be somewhat counter-intuitive to approach and understand the psychology of a person by only relying on an individualistic point of view, without the inclusion of their social reality. Psychological processes are not seen as something that is unaffected by one's social reality, rather the person affects and is affected by it. Moulds and is moulded by it. It is an interaction between one's outside reality and what goes on in one's head. (Burr, 2007, p. 10.) It is not something that could only be approached by figuratively placing a magnifying glass over the person's head and calling it a day. Turner and Oakes (1986) use the term "basic phenomena", which pin-points this perfectly: basic (cognitive) psychological processes are no more basic as phenomena than the other (social) psychological processes the individual is involved in. Human beings, generally speaking, live in an environment that is shared between other human beings, with its own meanings and intersubjectivity. "[S]ociety is in the individual as much as individuals are in society." (Turner & Oakes, 1986, pp. 237–240). Next, I will give a more exhaustive explanation of social identity theory (SIT).

3.1. Social identity theory

Social identity, in short, refers to a person's group memberships and the emotional attachments the person has to those memberships (Postmes, Reicher, & Spears, 1995, p. 176; Reed, 2002, p. 252; Reicher et al., 2010, p. 48; Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 240). In SIT it is assumed that there is an inherent

bias towards one's in-groups. In-groups refer to a person's concept of the groups they belong to, and with belonging comes a need to have a more positive reflection of an in-group compared to an out-group. Furthermore, in SIT, it is seen that there is interaction between psychological processes and social contexts and environments. (Cruwys et al., 2014, pp. 217–218; Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 240). A person's social identity and the categories involved take form over a long period of time. The social identity also determines what types of information a person assimilates, which is a process that involves childhood group-identifications and the various generally accepted and held notions a society has of groups: Social influence. Changes in intergroup relations are explained through situational effects, such as events that do not involve a group (e.g. natural disasters) or references to group characteristics, such as socio-economic status, or personal, generalized features. Ideological views of inherent group characteristics will likely be applied if a situation is seen as a threat to a person's self-image. (Hammack, 2015; Scuzzarello, 2015; Tajfel, 1969.)

A major part of SIT is in-group favouritism, which can come about even through relatively minor indications of belonging to a group (e.g. Tajfel, 1970). In order to make the distinction between an in-group and an out-group, the existence of the other, of both, is a necessity. Social comparison of these groups enables a person to distinguish between in-groups and out-groups. Through this comparison, group members have a tendency of trying to make their own group come out on top and appear as the more desirable group to belong to. (Postmes et al., 1995.) The person can define who they are and what groups they belong to in various ways, which may change depending on the situation. Therefore a person is seen as having a type of plethora of selves. (Reed, 2002, pp. 253, 255.) Although it might seem intuitive to think that social identities are something shared and of equal value to group members, the importance of an identity is not the same from person to person, even if these two people have a similar social identity (e.g. student). Determining the importance of a similar social identity between two people requires an inquiry to its self-importance for the person. (Scuzzarello, 2015, pp. 183, 194.) Experiences, goals and dreams related to the identity help expose the overall importance and value of the social identity to the person. Materialistic things relating to this identity may also have more importance and significance to the person. The social identity itself would have a more self-defining role depending on the person, and help identify with said social identity. (Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 218; Reed, 2002, p. 256; Scuzzarello, 2015.)

Identification, or rather social identification, refers to the process a person uses to recognise themselves as a part of a group (Cruwys et al., 2015, p. 66; Postmes et al., 1995, p. 176.) During the process of social identification the person sees that there is a distinct connection between another person, or another group, which could merely be a logical outcome of perceived similarities and

commonalities. Identification goes through different forms, starting from an unconscious process, which helps the person form their own frames of beliefs, values and behaviours, ending with a conscious process involving discrimination against, and denying possible social identifications. As long as an identification has a positive and important meaning for the person, it will not be abandoned (see Scuzzarello, 2015). A person will attempt to stop identifying with another person or group once it becomes less meaningful. (Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 218; Reed, 2002, p. 252; Tajfel & Turner, 2004, p. 286.)

Woolfolk, Doris, and Darley (2006) use the term "fundamental evaluative orientation" to explain the type of approach a person has when they identify positively to behaviour within a group, and the wants and desires related to said behaviour in any specific (social) identification. In other words, when a person is identifying themselves into a related social category, there is a type of link between the identification and the behaviour related to this identification. The behaviour would in this case be seen as if it *comes with the territory*. (Woolfolk et al., 2006; also see Postmes et al., 1995.) Identification can be seen as a process of categorising oneself into specific, relevant self-categories.

3.2 Self-categorization theory

Self-categorization theory (SCT) (e.g. Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) is often seen as an extension of, and an addition to, SIT. It not only functionalises SIT, but also makes it more comprehensive in tackling things such as the forming of groups and stereotyping. (Postmes et al., 1995, p. 177.) Categorisation allows for a more comprehensive understanding of group-belonging and group differences. They are seen as simplifications of otherwise complex intergroup relations. There are of course problems with these simplifications, if not for the mere fact that they easily become rooted categorisations in a group, which is especially evident with (negative) stereotypes. Nonetheless, Tajfel (1969) sees (negative) stereotypes as a bastardisation or mutation of useful categories. Categories are formed through an assumed positive correlation of the relationship between a group and a perceived, even assumed, feature of its members. (Cruwys et al., 2015, p. 66; Tajfel, 1969, pp. 83–88.)

Categorisations can range from an individual's characteristics, mannerisms, and traits, to knowledge-based, and culturally shared explanations as well as exaggerated correlations. One of the major reasons for these categories is to make clear separations between different groups (e.g. Scuzzarello, 2015, p. 192), and another one is that it can even become self-rewarding in an environment that does not challenge the categorisations. They also enable people to prefer one group over the other and base

their preferences to easily retrievable categories. (e.g. Hammack, 2015.) Furthermore, categorisations and the way in which groups are categorised may, and usually do, have a long history in culture, seen as culturally accepted and shared among its people(s). Social change may affect categories, eventually changing the somewhat rooted concepts people have of other groups. In order to change a category, the change needs to be understood. Two major factors Tajfel (1969) brings up in this conversation are, first, the individual should not feel powerless or unaware of the change, and second, it should not challenge the individual's "self-image or integrity" (p. 92). In other words, the individual should have a satisfactory explanation of the change, which in turn may intensify or lessen the individual's ties to their in-group(s). When discussing categories and categorisations, it is necessary to keep in mind that through the use of categories, people attempt to simplify their social surroundings. (Cruwys et al., 2014; Cruwys et al., 2015; Hammack, 2015, pp. 16–17; Tajfel, 1969, pp. 88–93.)

Through SCT it becomes possible to examine the mechanisms individuals use to become part of a social group. A person sees their categories as a part of some stimuli. Through the use of cognitive representations, the person will see similarities between themselves and the categories. Turner and Oakes (1986) point out three levels of self-categories people use when they define which categories they belong to. The first is a category of what I refer to as "species", which would naturally refer to a self-category of human being (as opposed to a dog, cat, etc.). The next category is in-group-out-group categorisation(s), which refers to the different categories people have of themselves in a broader sense (e.g. nationality, occupation, gender, etc.). The third category is defined as personal self-categorisations, which refers to the individual seeing themselves as someone unique, as well as seeing their in-group as something unique. Turner and Oakes (1986) make a further distinction of labelling these categories as "superordinate, social and subordinate" categories (p. 241; Also see Cruwys et al., 2014, pp. 229–231). For argument's sake see **Figure 1**, although I will not use these terms, as I consider them to be less comprehensive and accessible.

What all of these levels of self-categories hold in common is to discern different categories. They allow the individual to find similarities within their in-groups and differences with out-groups. Therefore the more similarities a person has with their in-group in comparison to the amount of differences they have to the out-group, the more the person is seen as someone who is representative of their in-group. Nonetheless, individuals at the same time perceive themselves to be different to other in-group members, yet are more similar to the in-group than they are to out-groups. This approach utilises stereotypical and somewhat polarised views of both the in-groups and out-groups in order to make a proper distinction between the perception of oneself and other people; depersonalised or detached views of the self as a stereotypical representative of the in-group. The aim

of SCT is to point to the notion that the concept of self is not strictly present only at an individual identity level, rather it is more interactive and moves from the personal self to a more social self. In- and out-group categorisations also reflect the social relations in a given context. (Turner & Oakes, 1986, pp. 241–242, 250; Postmes et al., 1995, p. 177; Reed, 2002, pp. 253–254.)
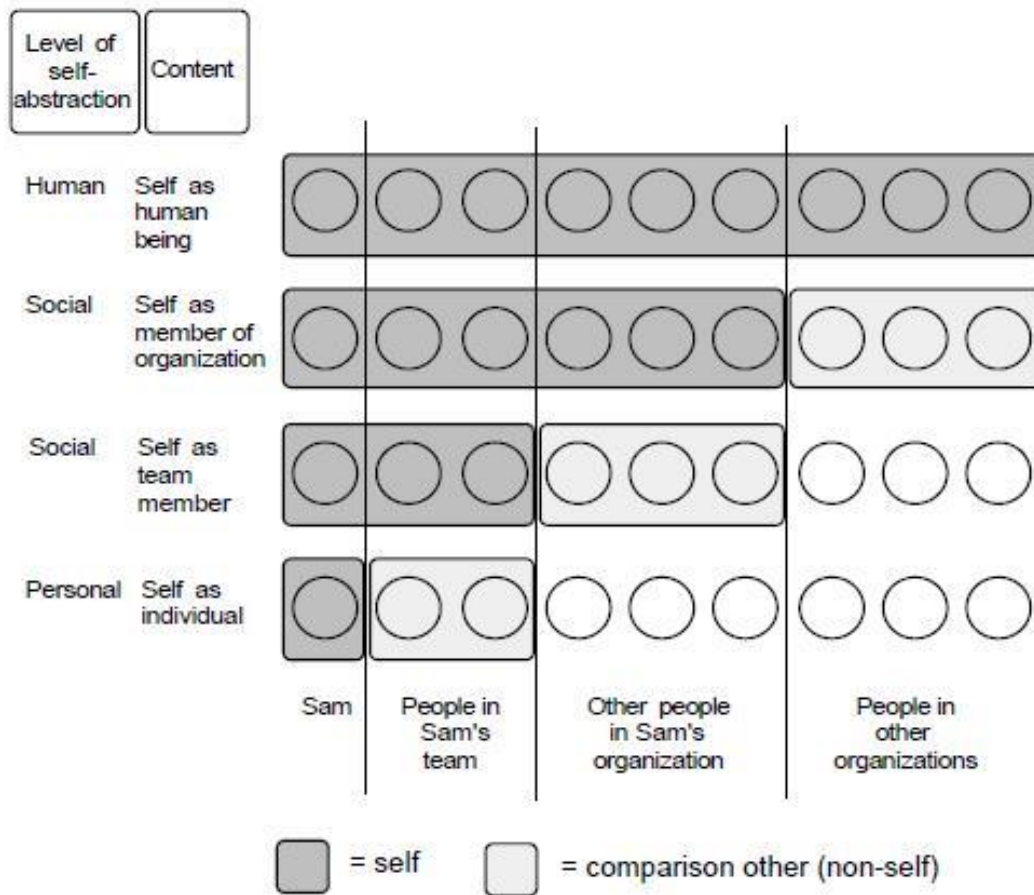
Figure 1: An example image showing how different levels of self-categories are present in an organisational environment. Adapted from "*Psychology in Organizations*" by Haslam, A. S. 2004, p. 32. London: Sage Publications.

3.3 The SIDE-model

Postmes et al. (1995) discuss the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE-model) as a critique towards deindividuation theory. They see that deindividuation theory makes unfair assumptions of people experiencing deindividuation by assuming that individuals lose control of themselves. Furthermore, deindividuation theory is not sufficient enough to explain all results from

its own experiments (e.g. Johnson & Downing, 1979). Situational cues, social identities, and conformed behavioural patterns based on the aforementioned effects, are almost fully ignored. (Postmes et al., 1995). To understand the story behind, and the practicality of, the SIDE-model I find it necessary to first discuss deindividuation theory.

3.3.1 Deindividuation theory

Deindividuation theory sees a deindividuated person as someone who loses their concept of the ruling social norms and may end up even contradicting them (e.g. Bordens & Horowitz, 2001; Johnson & Downing, 1979; Postmes et al., 1995). Social norms are the individual's understanding of how others expect the individual to behave, and how the individual expects others to behave, in any given social situation (Tajfel, 1970, p. 98). Deindividuation theory has a long history and Postmes et al. (1995) as well as Bordens and Horowitz (2001, p. 333) see deindividuation as a state of inhibited recognition of one's own identity leading the person to feel less responsible for their own actions. Deindividuation effects such as anonymity can affect the person's ethical and moral concepts and understanding. It is seen that deindividuation is caused by different situations, such as being a part of a large group where it is impossible to recognise any single individual by their individual characteristics from a group. In other words, an individual loses their individuality, their personal identity, which may lead to the disappearance of their inhibitions and control. Deindividuated individuals do not recognise or acknowledge their moral limits to the same extent as people who do not experience deindividuation. They will more likely react to environmental cues, and deindividuation is usually considered to be connected to groups whose primary purpose is to cause violence. Therefore it is assumed that the bigger the group, the larger the feeling of deindividuation. (Bordens & Horowitz, 2001.)

Empirical research has also been a part of deindividuation theory for a fair amount of time. For instance Diener, Fraser, Beaman and Kelem (1976) studied Halloween trick-or-treating children and the amount of candy they stole. The children were let into a house in groups, and the scientists observed over 1300 children. Each child was only allowed to take one candy, but the setting was made so that the children, although they were instructed not to, could steal either money or more candy. The anonymity of some children was manipulated by asking additional information from the children, such as their names and addresses. From the results, it was reported that there was a total of 416 instances of stealing, most of which came from stealing candy. Anonymous children stole noticeably more than non-anonymous children, which led the researchers to conclude that deindividuation effects, such as anonymity, were the reason for the lesser inhibition. (Diener et al., 1976.)

Postmes et al. (1995) find that the empirical evidence often used in arguments for deindividuation theory comes from Johnson and Downing's (1979) experiments. They had created an experimental design to test how situational cues affect the behavioural change brought by the inhibited recognition of the individual. The experiment was manipulated by giving the test subjects either a robe resembling the clothing worn by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) of the United States of America, or clothes resembling ones a nurse would wear at a hospital. They were then tasked to give (fake) electric shocks to research assistants (whom the test subjects thought were other test subjects) every time the assistants answered a part of a questionnaire wrong. It was assumed that the outfit alone was enough to either elicit normative or counter-normative behaviour, which was later supported by the results. As expected, the people wearing the robes reminiscent of the KKK gave electric shocks registering higher in their intensity to the assistants than the ones wearing a nurse's outfit. They also exhibited ruder and more harmful behaviour, whereas people wearing the nurse's outfit were more likely to lower the intensity of the electric shocks. (Johnson & Downing, 1979.) Postmes et al. (1995) see this as one of the examples where anonymity does not lead to counter-normative behaviour (p. 166).

When discussing anonymity, a modern version of it can be easily noticed in our everyday lives: Anonymity on the Internet. Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire discussed Internet anonymity as early as 1984. Internet behaviour is considered different to face-to-face (FtF) communication from multiple premises. For instance deindividuation factors such as the lack of physical contact and recognition according to individual features, can create misunderstandings in Internet-based communication. Gestures are considered to be a big part of face-to-face communication, the absence of which is a part of virtual group communication. Kiesler et al. (1984, p. 1126) divide gestures into multiple different features: Body movement, expressions, physical closeness, tone of voice, and so on. The assumption behind these features is that they give vital information about the ongoing communication, and allow a person to tweak, change and control their interaction. On the other hand, it is determined that the lack of vertical hierarchy (e.g. higher socio-economic status) is a largely positive effect in virtual communication. (Kiesler et al., 1984.)

Driskell, Radtke and Salas (2003) also discuss the deindividuation prevalent in virtual groups. They study how the virtual group itself affects virtual group members, and how much counter-normative behaviour they exhibit. Driskell et al. (2003) define counter-normative behaviour as negative behaviour, within which people typically exhibit hostility and negative feelings. According to Driskell et al., the explanation to this is the inability to express contextual utterances related to the conversation through computer-mediated communication, which in turn may lower a person's inhibitions. Furthermore, group effort as well as intra-group behaviour are also seen to be

considerably different in computer-mediated communication than in face-to-face communication (Driskell et al., 2003). The literature discusses similar concepts of misunderstandings as Kiesler et al. (1984) do in the aforementioned literature. Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, and De Groot (2001) challenge negative views of computer-mediated, deindividuated communication, by pointing out how deindividuation effects, such as anonymity, do not only cause the person to exhibit negative effects. Through two experiments, Postmes et al. found support for increased group cohesion and stronger group norms in virtual groups. Through the manipulation of anonymity and group norms, Postmes et al. found higher conformity towards these norms when the group members were anonymous (Postmes et al., 2001).

As to the type of anonymity, in computer mediated conversation (CMC) there are different levels of anonymity. These levels can be divided into fully anonymous, and pseudonymity or visual anonymity, although none of them prevent the user from just creating a fake identity (Oksanen, Räsänen, & Hawdon, 2014, p. 29). Reddit in particular has pseudonymity, i.e. it is not fully anonymous and users have to create a pseudonym in order to partake in the conversation (the act of "naming" themselves, see Martin, 2016, p. 80, for reference). Reddit's particularity is in that it shows popular topics on its front page for all Reddit users to see and potentially partake in, or at the very least the popular topics from the subreddits the user is subscribed to (Massanari, 2017, p. 330). The popularity of a topic is measured by its "upvoting" and "downvoting" systems (Massanari, 2017, p. 331; Richterich, 2014), which in turn can create a feedback loop among the subscribers (Massanari, 2017, p. 330; Richterich, 2014; see Keipi, Näsi, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2017, p. 18 for feedback loop). Although this voting system is not important to the topic of this master's thesis per se, it does relate to a topic that will be shortly discussed at the end, namely the feedback loop.

3.3.2 Social identity model of deindividuation effects

The assumption that a person loses self-control is prevalent in deindividuation theory. Although deindividuation theory has empirical evidence supporting it, this support can be placed under scrutiny. Postmes et al. (1995) scrutinise deindividuation theory for not taking the situational cues and the adopted social identities prevalent in experiments into account through the use of social identity theory. The situational cues and adopted social identities are what give the individual understanding of the mannerisms and behaviours they are supposed to adopt, exhibit and conform to. The SIDE-model is an answer to the results found in deindividuation experiments that are impossible to explain through the use of deindividuation theory itself. The model makes it possible to understand the results where test subjects did not only portray counter-normative behaviour, even though they were under

what is defined as a deindividuation effect (such as anonymity, see Johnson & Downing, 1979). In other words, by utilising the SIDE-model, the test subject would not be seen as a person who has lost sense of who they are or of their own self-control, quite the opposite in fact: Individuals apply control over their own social identity by conforming to the cues exuded by the environment and other group members. If the environment produces no available information, the individual will conform to the information produced by the group. (Postmes et al., 1995.) This conformity was also discussed in the previous chapter of self-categorization theory (e.g. Turner & Oakes, 1986).

McKenna and Bargh (1998) also discuss the lacklustre capabilities of deindividuation theory to properly explain normative behaviour as a cause of deindividuation. Through the use of three experiments McKenna and Bargh find that anonymity can allow people with social stigmas to find and belong to different virtual groups for similarly stigmatised people, due to their anonymity. This helped them find support groups, give a sense of belonging, and prevent feelings of isolation and loneliness. Belonging to a group meant for stigmatised people lessened the sense of social isolation and prevented them from becoming more estranged from society. A further effect of belonging to the virtual group was that the members would start expressing their virtual group belonging in offline environments as well, simultaneously making the group membership a part of their offline reality, not just their virtual or online reality. (McKenna & Bargh, 1998.)

The results from deindividuation experiments would, in other words, come from the subjects' experienced conformity to their own social group, rather than heightened and emphasised counter-normative behaviour, as deindividuation theory explains it. The social context and the social identity related to said context is key. Conformity and group polarisations are important concepts in determining the social identity, which becomes meaningful once there is a relevant out-group to refer to. Both conformity and polarisation on the other hand are heightened, or rather the sensitivity towards them is, when group-membership and deindividuation effects (e.g. anonymity) are strong, which in turn causes greater polarisation to pre-established group norms. On the other hand, when the feeling of group membership is low, anonymity also lessens the amount of polarisation experienced by the individual. Therefore polarisation and conformity do not necessarily lead to negative and counter-normative attitudes, nor necessarily encourage a person to exhibit antisocial behaviour. In summary, the feeling of conformity, in the SIDE-model, becomes greater when a person experiences deindividuation as well as group membership. The group membership and anonymity are what may give the person cues to act in a counter-normative manner. The important thing to know, therefore, is that counter-normativity is not an intrinsic value of deindividuation itself. (Postmes et al., 1995.)

The adopted social identities, the utilised self-categorisations and social identifications, all play their part in creating a comprehensive explanation of deindividuation effects: the SIDE-model. Of course no model nor theory is perfect. Nonetheless, the SIDE-model does allow for a more flexible, and frankly less judgmental and assuming approach to aspects such as anonymity and computer-mediated communication than deindividuation theory. The use of the SIDE-model here is to give a better understanding of how the individuals in my analyses discussing their experiences identify with their respective online environments. While the intention is not to make assumptions of who they are offline, it is important to help understand who it is they are portraying in their messages to better comprehend the accounts of events they have experienced.

3.3.3 Applying social identity to the Internet

As has been discussed so far, social identity is adopted in social interaction with other people (e.g. Tajfel, 1969). Of note, though, is that interacting on the Internet can be vastly different to face-to-face communication due to the different nuances and interaction environments people utilise during their computer-mediated communication (e.g. Kiesler et al., 1984; Martin, 2016). But there are similarities as well. According to one view, the first and foremost action is to name oneself in order to be able to partake in social interaction. The act of naming oneself is to become a being capable of social interaction. Though the difference between the Internet and face-to-face (FtF) communication is that the former is a name chosen and created by the person that can be picked from a plethora of factors in the person's environment, whereas the latter is usually a given name that signifies familial ties and a means to identify within one's own family. The factors in a person's environment that affect the chosen name can range from anything between everyday life-events, objects within one's culture, individual characteristics and so on. The name that has been chosen can even hold some sort of special significance to the person, or can even be used to antagonise someone or something. (Guzzetti, 2008; Martin, 2016, p. 80.)

As was previously mentioned, the lack of physical contact and cues on the Internet could lead to communication problems among the people participating in the (online) conversation (Kiesler et al., 1984, p. 1126; Martin, 2016, p. 81). Although to the extent in which Kiesler et al. (1984) argued that normative behaviour would decrease in computer-mediated communication (CMC), Postmes et al. (2001) pointed out that it could be quite the opposite. They argued that reaching a mutually shared (social) identity emphasises, rather than hinders, norms actively shared within a specific group (p. 1244), as was also previously discussed in the SIDE-model section. Nonetheless, Martin (2016) argued that the lack of physical contact might not be as clear-cut as one might first assume. She

discusses the uniqueness of CMC in that it is an "intimate distance" (p. 82), where it is both a distant and an active form of communication. It is still significantly different to FtF communication, especially due to the different types of behaviour a person portrays in an online environment (e.g. having defences to block unwanted communication, or openly communicating with strangers online), as well as having a more creative approach to one's own online identity. (Christopherson, 2007, p. 3052; Guzzetti, 2008, p. 459; Martin, 2016.)

It can be noted that the ownership of a virtual social identity, can be similarly important to the person as it is to have an offline social identity (McKenna & Bargh, 1998, p. 681). These virtual identities are useful from multiple perspectives. The possession of a virtual social identity can give freedom for younger people to explore their developing identities, as well as communicate more freely with others in any Internet group that is relevant to the person (Christopherson, 2007, pp. 3042–3043; Guzzetti, 2008, p. 457). McKenna and Bargh (1998) further argue that people with stigmatised identities (i.e. identities that are considered "abnormal" in society and are hence marginalised and to be hidden from public view) can both express their hidden stigmatised identities as well as find groups of people with similar stigmatisations. Through this, an individual can even build a strong, positive association with their stigmatised identity and adopt it as a part of their identity as a whole (instead of wanting or having to hide it). Not only can the strong needs to belong to a group of people with similar stigmatisations be met, so can the needs to have emotional connections with others as well as learn new things about oneself, or more specifically, one's group. It might not be enough to have a positive effect on one's self-esteem though, but it is a good start into learning how to accept a part of oneself that is otherwise seen as something that should not be accepted. Important aspects of oneself need to be expressed daily in order to have a lasting effect on one's self-esteem. Bringing the stigmatised identity into FtF communication, such as revealing one's hidden stigma to family members, friends, and co-workers, is one of many ways one can claim that the stigma is a part of themselves and they do not need to be ashamed of it. (McKenna & Bargh, 1998.)

McKenna and Bargh (1998) discuss that due to the socially produced pressure to hide one's stigmatised identity, the person can become depressed (p. 693). Of note here is that the stigmatised identities McKenna and Bargh (1998) discussed, had mostly to do with features the people didn't necessarily want to get "rid of" in a way, such as homosexuality or physical traits. But depression is seen as a mental health problem (e.g. Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 215). Problem being the key word here, something people are trying to rid themselves of. Were we still living in the seventies, one could potentially be assumed to have the "mental disease" of homosexuality that they should be "cured" of (e.g. WHO, ICD-9, 1979), but we are not living in the seventies, and marginalised identities such as

homosexuality may be something the person would want to identify themselves as and in their group identity (McKenna & Bargh, 1998, p. 692). Depression might not necessarily be something a person would try to be proud of, and hence may hold a bit of a different place in a person's self-concept than being homosexual, for instance. However, I will point to arguments noting how accepting depression and finding support groups for those with depression, have helped with said depression (e.g. Cruwys et al., 2015). Hence identifying and creating an online identity within a stigmatised group may be the best course of action to alleviate the feeling associated with depression itself.

With this it is safe to conclude my chapter on social identity, and of course social identification, self-categorisation, deindividuation and the SIDE-model. The aim of this chapter was to give a better understanding of how identities are adopted. The next chapter shall explain the research method, narrative positioning analysis (NPA) in detail, how it can work in tandem with social identity theory (SIT), as well as the epistemological discussion surrounding these topics.

4 METHOD

Although the argument that the Internet can be a haven for hate and degeneracy can be made (e.g Massanari, 2017), it does not describe the entirety of Internet communities. While deindividuation is a convenient source for blame, the available research is not always so cut-and-dry on whether the Internet truly is something to be avoided if one wants to have any type of meaningful interaction. McKenna and Bargh's (1998) research into deindividuation and social stigmas gives important insight into this matter: A group of people, stigmatised by the prevailing offline society for their various human features, had no other place to feel like they were part of a group, except on the Internet.

But what about depression and problematic behaviour online? Indeed, at first glance it might seem like the Internet is at the root of depression, but looking at it more closely, it seems as though Internet addiction might be to blame for that, not the Internet in and of itself. Of course, research results depicting the Internet as the cause of depression do exist (e.g. Ha et al., 2007), but at the same time the Internet provides invaluable support groups. Of special note is how, on the Internet, there is no real concept of hierarchy, people cannot realistically tell who is and is not a peer, partly due to anonymity. This only plays into the cohesion of Internet support groups, hence making them a viable option to feel *not alone*. (e.g. Martin, 2016, p. 81.)

I mention this to further hammer in the importance of studying the Internet without a preconceived notion of hostility on the Internet. This claim does not deny that negativity and things of such nature exist online, rather points to the parts of the Internet that may be of help to someone desperate, alone, and misunderstood: A point of focus. I believe that studying the narratives online would give further insight as to how social identity is formed (see e.g. Archakis & Tzanne, 2005; Scuzzarello, 2015, p. 182) and how it functions to help alleviate some of the biggest issues affiliated with depression. Namely countering isolation by belonging to a group (e.g. Cruwys et al., 2015), which, as has been covered already, is a major part of social identity. Would it then be correct to say that having a social identity, belonging to a personally important peer group, could be a way to treat a major problem associated with depression? Some research has shown how using the Internet to de-alienate people suffering from depression, alleviates feelings of social withdrawal, a major cause and consequence of depression (e.g. Cruwys et al., 2015; Cruwys et al., 2014; Selfhout et al., 2009).

The reason why I mention this in the introduction of this method section, is to bring what has been looked at until now into a comprehensive frame of reference, so to speak. As a way of imagining this as a whole, one could think of depression and exercise as a means of identification, identification (social identity) and exercise as a means of countering depression, and narratives as the tool in which

people can express and do these. Or even just thinking of it as wanting to feel less depressed, exercising due to depression, and then creating narratives of this in order to enable a positive social identification (e.g. Cruwys et al., 2015).

4.1 Data

The subreddit this research material was gathered from is called "Exercise Out Of Depression" (EOOD), with its own codes of conduct (retrieved 2017, has recently been changed):

https://www.reddit.com/r/EOOD/

> [1] "*This is a subreddit for those who suffer from any mental health problems, promoting the importance of fitness for your physical and psychological well being.*
>
> *Here you will find a few things:*
>
> - *A friendly and supportive environment*
> - *Exercise tips and advice*
> - *Somewhere to discuss fitness & mental health*
> - *A place to discuss opinions, share articles and learn*
>
> *[...]*
>
> *Please note, we would like to encourage posts to be related to fitness in order for this sub to remain true to it's name. Whether you include details of your mental health in your post is up to you. Please respect people and what they write.*
>
> ***Anything intended to cause others to feel unhappy or uncomfortable will not be tolerated. We are here to support other people. If you feel that anyone is breaking any of these rules then please use the report button or message a moderator.[...]*"

The research material presented in this master's thesis has been gathered from a research collaboration between professor of social psychology Atte Oksanen (University of Tampere) and Doctor David Garcia (Medical University of Vienna). The project in question gathered material dealing with pro-health and anti-health topics from numerous websites (e.g. Oksanen et al., 2015; Oksanen, Garcia, & Räsänen, 2016). Protecting the complete anonymity of the people studied here is going to be problematic due to the particular way narratives are studied: the text should not be altered (see Labov & Waletzky, 1997, p. 3, for reference). However, while personal in nature, these narratives are published on websites with free, full access to anyone, registered or not. Furthermore, Reddit

already anonymises their users through pseudonyms and by not publishing any information about them other than what they post online. These narratives should be respected as having a lot of personal value for the people writing them, but at the same time it would be impossible to fully make these posts untraceable.

As to the posts themselves, I picked which parts to use based on two criteria: 1. the material should deal with Internet communities, and 2. the material should focus on health-related behaviour. It quickly became apparent how many group membership signifiers were present in the comments of the subreddit "Exercise out of Depression" (EOOD). There were numerous comments in various forms, some of which were only a word or a couple sentences long. After reading through longer comments, which can be described as *narratives*, it became feasible to approach the material through narrative analysis. Having studied multiple forms of narrative analysis, narrative positioning seemed to fit the material, while simultaneously opening up the opportunity to study how social identities are portrayed in an "illness of isolation" (Karp, 2016, p. 7).

While positioning analysis does not necessarily require the material to be in story form or a monologue (e.g. Korobov & Bamberg, 2007), I chose stories (narratives) and monologues from the research data due to them seemingly giving a more detailed view into the series of events a person struggling with depression goes through. Narratives are considered to be a way for people to understand or construct their social reality, find or create their position in it, and construct or develop their personal and social identities (Scuzzarello, 2015, p. 182). Hence a person's own recollection of a series of events seems most fitting for the study of NPA and SIT. In order to test that, I conducted a few pilot analyses based on previous research (e.g. De Fina, 2013) so that I could determine whether or not narrative positioning could be accurately analysed, while additionally researching the social identities (and self-categories) within the narratives and positions themselves. Having come to similar conclusions as past research, I decided to proceed with my approach.

It could be argued that SIT and positioning analysis come from two different epistemological origins. This is not an issue, though, as shall be explained shortly. With the next segment I hope any doubts of the potential or scientific utilisation of the two concepts together, SIT and NPA respectively, will be laid to rest. At least to the degree that it becomes clear how the differences do not affect the analyses themselves or the conclusions that could be drawn from them.

4.2 Constructionism-experimentalism-debate

Jost and Kruglanski (2002) note that social constructionist approaches and experimental social psychological approaches have been separated by the argument that there is an epistemological divide between the two approaches. They argue that this divide is less representative of the actual situation than is often reported and that they in fact have similar roots and explanations of human behaviour (pp. 169–170, 182).

A concise summary of the differences can be found on page 169:

> "The main difference between the two viewpoints is that, because of their attraction to postmodernist thought, social constructionists have embraced the argument that representations of reality are arbitrary and relative, whereas experimentalists have maintained that processes of social construction are determined by our cognitive apparatus and by features of the social context. Furthermore, experimentalists (but not constructionists) believe that (a) it is useful and worthwhile to empirically investigate the, ways in which dispositional and situational factors govern the process of social construction, and (b) adhering to specific methodological standards increases the likelihood that the experimenter's (socially constructed) conclusions bear some useful relationship to external reality." (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, p. 169)

Jost and Kruglanski point out that, within social psychology, social constructionists often criticise experimentalists for assuming that their scientific approaches would be somehow representative of social behaviour and show validity outside of its specific context, time and location, or in other words "limited to specific historical, cultural, and ideological contexts" (p. 171). Social constructionists accuse experimentalists of using arbitrarily defined *objective* methods to find out the truth in a social situation, when the truth itself would be illusive at best. They further argue that too much emphasis has been given to scientific voices and that scientists as well as lay-men all take part in the same discourse: Being a scientist will not give a person a better understanding of the situation by default. A further difference between the two approaches is that experimentalists tend not to take part in the goings-on of the *outside world* (i.e. stick to their studies), whereas constructionists do take part in discourse that deals with societal and political issues. Lastly, social constructionists are commended for affecting social psychology as a whole by offering ways to analyse material with a more open-minded approach and by helping researchers notice their own potential biases in their analyses. (pp. 169–171, 174, 176.)

Jost and Kruglanski point out to issues with a strictly constructionist view in social psychology. First, the experimentalist view often criticised in constructionist arguments is not as inflexible and

unrepresentative of human behaviour as is frequently presented. While the argument that studying an objective truth in human interaction does hold merit, the idea behind doing scientific research is to find whatever *truth* exists at that moment in time. Therefore the pursuits of experimentalists should not be easily shrugged off as unrepresentative of anything. After all,

> "Although constructionists believe that numerous alternative representations are possible, they do not deny that people should (and do) choose among representations and adopt those that they find most compelling, or at least subjectively valid, even if only on the basis of rhetoric or other pragmatic grounds[.] Social constructionists, therefore, share at least some of the experimentalist's interest in the process of persuasion whereby certain constructions win out over others[.]" (p.174)

Furthermore, experimentalists do not claim that their results are representative of a larger, unchanging, objective "truth", rather they provide academic, critical "guesses" as to what they are presenting. Attributing the same value to each description presented within a discourse would also lose the point of doing academic inquiry. (pp. 174–175.)

A further issue with a strictly constructionist point of view would be that the basic idea behind constructed reality could allow the researcher to lose focus on the actual events that unfold in life, such as oppression. Jost and Kruglanski put it succinctly: "The philosophical implication is that people are not really oppressed; they just think they are" (p. 175). Jost and Kruglanski see that there is nothing preventing experimental researchers from producing empirical data of social issues such as injustice, even by constructionist standards. Rather, further scientific assessment should be utilised in determining which constructions hold relevant meaning and which would lead to more representative results, instead of treating each construction as equally valid. Regardless of whether or not reality is seen as ultimately unattainable, it could rather be seen as a driving force for whatever construction is presented as a description of a certain situation. An experimentalist approach such as this therefore cannot conclusively be defined as futile, rather a scientifically sound attempt at representing a construction based on the real influence its social background exerts (historical, societal, etc.: see Kus, Liu, & Ward, 2013; Liu & Hilton, 2005, for reference). (pp. 175–176.)

As has been previously mentioned, there might not necessarily be an insurmountable divide between constructionist and experimentalist views in social psychology. In fact, utilising these views in tandem with one another might offer a foundation that is simultaneously flexible as well as applicable to a multitude of contexts (e.g. Archakis & Tzanne, 2005; Bamberg, 2010; De Fina, 2013; De Fina 2015; Deppermann, 2013; Hammack & Toolis, 2015; Hatoss, 2012; Kus et al., 2013; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Ochs, 1993; Scheibe & Barrett, 2016). Jost and Kruglanski conveniently bring up social identity

theory as one approach that has this combination as its foundation. While it would be erroneous to claim that SIT is constructionist at its core, Jost and Kruglanski (as well as Tajfel, 1979, himself) argue that the process of constructing identities is a part of it. The way SIT is considered and studied has an underlying assumption that, based on the situation in which people interact, the presented, assumed, adopted and further enacted identities would differ (e.g. Postmes et al., 1995). Group norms, the various features that define group membership, past events that affect any intergroup situations, the effects the environment has on the groups themselves, and so on, are all considered to affect which social identities are produced during interaction (e.g. Hammack & Toolis, 2015). Additionally research in SIT is seen to have produced numerous scientifically valid results. Jost and Kruglanski point out that it is a combination of both constructionist and experimentalist views that have made an approach such as this possible, a combination which arguably still provides sound results in the field of social psychology, at least in Europe. (2002, pp. 178–179.)

It could be argued that the divide is necessary because of an epistemological difference in approaching any given material. Indeed there are some differences (e.g. Jost & Kruglanski, 2002 p.171; Korobov, 2015), but the approaches might have more in common than first meets the eye. Not only do constructionist and experimentalist viewpoints stem from the same intellectual assumption that subjective experiences and social interaction are at the core of social phenomena, but also social constructionism could easily be seen as an expression of the core argument of experimental psychology, where "people engage in an active and motivated construction of their own realities" (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, p. 173). While commended for bringing stricter scientific fidelity to social psychological research, the necessity of the divide in this modern age is arguably unnecessary in regards to the more *hybrid* approaches social psychology already has and utilises in its research. (p. 170–174; see above for examples). In fact it might not even be a case of approaching research data from a fundamentally different perspective (e.g. Scheibe & Barrett, 2016), instead just a matter of looking at the variation among opinions versus trying to find which opinion closest represents the current construction: "[E]ach side incorporates the other's views, even if only as 'ground' to its preferred figure." (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, p.182; see Hammack, 2015, p. 26.)

There is a point to be made that the two approaches combined could achieve scientifically satisfying results, as has been mentioned. Next we will look a bit deeper as to how and why, what can they exactly learn from one another? As has been previously covered, a more constructionist approach could give experimental social psychologists more tools to take part in political and societal discourse at large. As social psychologists should, seeing as how ours is a science situated right in the middle of culturally relevant current topics: "social psychological research is as relevant to society and

politics as clinical psychological research is to mental health" (Jost & Kruglanski, p. 175). Not only that but social psychological research could also offer multiple possible hypotheses with a clever use of both ways of thinking, allowing for more variation in the field of social psychological research as well as more flexibility in the research methods themselves. This approach has already yielded results (as was covered in the discussion of SIT), and it could be seen that the tendency experimentalists have in conceiving comprehensive approaches to research topics could be adopted by constructionists as well, yielding possibly even more diverse research results. Additionally, a more experimentalist approach could give constructionists a way to persuade the opponents of any given, properly conducted, research results due to how experimentalists apply commonly accepted research methods. So too can experimentalists learn from constructionists. As was previously mentioned, experimentalists can get a better understanding of the researcher's own inherent bias in the interpretation of their research results. Not only that, but give experimentalists a chance to theorise on a bigger scale, outside of their very limited, controlled research results, the immediate research data. (Jost & Kurglanski, 2002, pp. 175–180.)

Learning from one another is arguably a good way to increase the overall scientific fealty of social psychological research. Not only would social psychology as a whole have the confidence to assert that their results are valid, and should not be taken lightly, by adopting the experimentalists' conscientious use of commonly accepted and hard-to-dispute methods, there would also be no need to come up with an explanation for every incident of human nature discovered in yet another new experimental design. Instead, researchers could theorise on the larger impacts that the study could have. As long as it is acknowledged that there is room for error in research results, improvements to future methods of research are possible, especially with an understanding of both constructionist and experimentalist approaches. (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, pp. 181–183.)

The achievements of incorporating both approaches speak for themselves. Aside from how SIT can be seen as such an approach by Jost and Kruglanski (2002, p. 178), as well as the opportunities to partake in ideological/political discourse experimentalists would receive from incorporating constructionist viewpoints, social psychological research has seen other commendable results and wider potential in what could be concluded, studied and confronted. This combination of viewpoints is especially present in European social psychological research. In fact, such approaches to social interaction have shown that in the case of attitudinal judgment, for instance, people can construct an understanding of their current situation by referring to numerous *stable* concepts affecting them in their cultural backgrounds (e.g. Hammack & Toolis, 2015; Kus et al., 2013). Not only that, but such approaches have further broadened the scope of what social psychology can research, such as on the

topics of "perception, cognition, language, and communication" (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, p. 179). Additionally, topics dealing with attitude and language formation, identity, as well as culture, can be studied with further impunity by a skilful utilisation of experimentalist habits to come up with general principles as well as the constructionist concept that an expressed reality at a given moment is constructed from that moment (and the aforementioned factors; e.g. Archakis & Tzanne, 2005). Indeed, "social psychology would be stronger if the two camps entered into a meaningful reunification", instead of a stubborn divide between the two (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, p. 180). cultural psychology is a good example of what can come from a combination of both aspects. Furthermore, social psychologists could focus on social levels of human behaviour, instead of attempting to scale down to the level of biological factors for instance. (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, pp. 175, 177, 179–180.)

"As social psychologists, we are expected to provide answers to the question of why a given individual (or group of individuals) embraces specific beliefs." (Jost & Kruglanski, p. 181) With a combination of experimentalist and constructionist points of view, answering these questions that locate at the very core of social psychology, with further academic confidence, is possible thanks to said combination of both approaches (e.g. Hatoss, 2012). Partly also in thanks to utilising experimental methods with constructionist ideas of the creation of social reality. Hypotheses could be rejected with greater confidence and the validity and reproduction of research methods and results could be further enhanced. Let alone getting the courage to partake in social issues. Instead of seeing the other view as opposition, maybe viewing it as *complementary* has a better effect (e.g. Bamberg, 2010)? Wouldn't we as a field of (social) science want to be unified? The results would surely be difficult to hand wave or shrug off as just dust in the wind, as unimaginative and socially irrelevant. A house divided is an easy target after all. Now what would happen if we united? (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, pp. 181–183.) There is definitely potential in a combination of the approaches. Besides, at this point I am confident enough to ask, why not?

4.3 Narrative positioning analysis

As previously discussed, there is no inherent need to make a separation between SIT or narrative analysis due to their epistemological histories, at least in this thesis, because my intention is to merely show that they can be used in tandem. I will further explain why Bamberg's (1997) approach to narrative positioning analysis does not exclude the use of SIT, although points such as Korobov's (2015) about the lack of research conducted on the construction of situated identities through discursive actions, as well as Pöysä's (2009) about positioning being a part of social constructionist

heritage, are duly noted. While arguments like these do have their own merit, they do not necessarily constrict the use of SIT in a study of narratives (see Jost & Kruglanski, 2002; Scuzzarello, 2015), nor are they of particular interest in this specific case. I merely intend to show how, through positioning, social identities are formed and/or portrayed within the narrative (positioning). In fact, Korobov (2010) himself describes narrative positioning as a way to "embody more than discursive actions" (p. 268), stating that it should also take into account the available cultural identities of the people being positioned (pp. 268–269). So what exactly is narrative positioning analysis?

Bamberg (1997) posits three levels of positioning in narratives: "Level 1. How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the reported events?", "Level 2. How does the speaker position him- or herself to the audience?" And "Level 3. How do narrators position themselves to themselves?" (All quotes from p. 337). Positioning can be studied from dialogue (e.g. De Fina, 2013) or through what basically amounts as a monologue, a *story*, usually in response to a request, question, etcetera (e.g. Bamberg, 1997). The concept of master narratives is also present to some extent, but barely covered by Bamberg in his own studies (e.g. 1997, and with co-author Georgakopoulou, 2008). Master narratives shall be shortly discussed in the following chapters.

4.3.1 Narrative positioning analysis level 1

Bamberg (1997) describes the first level of narrative positioning as a way of positioning the characters presented in the narrative in relation to one another. Bamberg gives examples of the characters being positioned as protagonists, antagonists, perpetrators, victims, and so on; as agents (the person who *is in control* the action), or as a "central character" being affected by outside forces, sometimes being rewarded through sheer coincidence or strength of character (p. 337). This level has also been referred to as the "story world" (De Fina, 2013, p. 44; Deppermann, 2013, p. 64; Pöysä, 2009, p. 319), or just as "the story" (Hatoss, 2012, p. 51). In Bamberg's (1997) example of level 1 positioning, he mentions that children tend to position the characters in their narratives in the first level (p. 337): "children at the age of 6 years do not seem to be able to make far-reaching claims with regard to their identity that enable us to analyse their narratives for positioning at Level 3" (p. 340). Nonetheless, typical of level 1 positioning is to position the other person as being wrong for their actions, if they have caused the *protagonist* to become angry for instance (p. 338; see De Fina, 2013, p. 53).

De Fina (2013) echoes much of Bamberg's (1997) approach, especially in researching the attribution of the narrative's *antagonists* as those exerting some type of force on the *protagonist*, and the *antagonists* having unjustifiable or morally questionable reasons for behaving the way they do. She

further adds that *antagonists* are easily seen as stereotypical representatives of the negative features associated with certain social groups of people: Embodying a type of *all that could be wrong about being X*, while simultaneously seeing the *protagonist's* social group as a more morally desirable and/or positively representative group of people. (De Fina, 2013, p. 53.) There happens to be a theoretical approach that deals with exactly this, the one I have already extensively written about: Social identity theory.

Interestingly enough, SIT and narrative positioning analysis seem to have more in common than could be assumed by just viewing their epistemological origins (see Jost & Kruglanski, 2002; Korobov, 2010; Pöysä, 2009). At level 1 in narrative positioning analysis (from here on referred to as *NPA*), an intentional effort to make one's in-group seem more desirable (see Postmes et al., 1995, for reference) than the out-group (the *protagonist's* social group VS the *antagonist's* social group) can be seen in level 1 NPA (e.g. De Fina, 2013, p. 53; Deppermann, 2013, p. 73). Furthermore, attributing the negative features of group memberships to out-group members has been a part of the studies of SIT (e.g. Scuzzarello, 2015, p. 194), as well as expressing one's own in-group as the group that has been wronged (e.g. Kus et al., 2013), or have not wronged others (e.g. Hammack & Toolis, 2015). All of these relate to how the narrator positions the people in their narrative as characters. It is noted that narrative positioning does not necessarily make a distinction between personal and social identity (see Bamberg, 2010), but due to the nature of this specific study and the focus on social identities within the narratives, making that distinction is not going to be of particular interest (i.e. attempting to somehow make a distinction between a social and a personal identity).

4.3.2 Narrative positioning analysis level 2

The second level of positioning is described by Bamberg (1997, p. 337) as a means of *instructing* the audience as to how they should interpret the narrative or what they should do in a similar situation, possibly even attempting to vindicate the narrator him-/herself for their actions to the audience. This level of positioning also allows for establishing a "*we* VS. *they*" (p. 338, original emphasis) position among the narrator and audience (*we*) versus whomever the possible antagonist(s) is (are; *them*). This level can also be used by the narrator as a means of expressing their potential knowledge or expertise in a matter, effectively portraying or positioning him-/herself as an authority on a topic to the audience. Positioning at this level would depend on the audience as well as the situation. How a narrative is told and the moral stances positioned within the narrative could differ depending on the audience, for instance in cases such as telling a narrative to the narrator's parents versus peers. At first glance it might seem like this level is synonymous or similar to level 3 positioning, but at level 3 the narrator

further elaborates on the question of "Who am I?" (Bamberg, 1997, p. 337), level 2 merely positions the narrator in relation to their status as the one telling the story, and what their status should be regarded as among the audience (e.g. Deppermann, 2015, p. 374). With of course the further addition of what the audience themselves are positioned as, not only in relation to the narrative, but the narrator and act of narrating as well (Bamberg, 1997, p. 338).

This level is sometimes referred to as the "narration level" (Pöysä, 2009, p. 319), "interactive positioning in the here and now" (Deppermann, 2013, p. 65), "the way narrators position themselves [and their audience] in the story-telling world" (De Fina, 2013, p. 43), or just "the telling" (Hatoss, 2012, p. 51). De Fina (2013) has a similar approach to Bamberg's (1997) in her own example analysis of level 2 positioning: *Vindicating* the narrator, the narrator's (correct) moral stance of condemning the wrongdoings of the *antagonists*, instituting a *we* and *they* divide, are all part of De Fina's (2013) own research into this level (pp. 53–54). Coincidentally (again), the whole *us* and *them* divide is an important factor in the study of SIT.

At level 2 positioning, it is common to position the audience as a part of *us*, a part of the collective who understands and shares the narrator's stance, who are against *them*, the *antagonists* of the narrative. Now it would be false to claim that there always exists an *antagonist* in these narratives, but for argument's sake the *opposing force* that could be talked about within a given narrative, can be regarded as *antagonists*. Nonetheless, narrators often narrate their narratives for certain audiences. (e.g. Bamberg, 1997; De Fina, 2013; Deppermann, 2013.) And here is where it would be easy to draw a line to SIT. While I will not necessarily talk about the motivation for narrating, I will argue that SIT could provide a reason for a narrative to be directed at a specific group of people, and why the tone of that narrative differs depending on the group of people it is being told to (see Bamberg, 1997, pp. 338–339). These reasons could range from anywhere between trying to portray one's own group's struggles to another group (e.g. De Fina, 2013) to portraying group membership with a peer (e.g. Bamberg 1997), as can be seen in SIT arguments as well (such as Hammack, 2015; Tajfel, 1969; Turner & Oakes, 1986). And while not directly related to positioning level 2, rather narratives in general, there is a point to be made from what Hammack and Toolis (2015) state that "the discursive demands of social identity" are what drives narratives into *being* a certain way (p. 350). They made this statement in relation to *master narratives*, but I will come back to this after the third level of positioning analysis.

4.3.3 Narrative positioning analysis level 3

The third and final level of Bamberg's (1997) three level positioning analysis has to do with the narrator's identity, the question of "[w]ho am I[?]" (Bamberg, 1997, p. 337; 2010; De Fina, 2015, p. 360; Deppermann, 2013, p. 66; 2015, p. 374; Hatoss, 2012, p. 51; Pöysä, 2009, p. 319). More accurately, this level refers to the identity claims the narrator holds *outside* the current narration, i.e. what the narrator's identity (-ies) is (are) *beyond* level 1 (the characters in the narrative) and level 2 (how the audience and narrator are positioned in relation to each other). While identity might not always remain the same, level 3 refers to the other features of the narrator that are present outside its current story world and act of telling. This is not to say that it couldn't be constructed in situ, rather the construction (if one were to use that term) would happen in the *background* of the narration event. In other words, it would be a deeper understanding of the person's identity (e.g. De Fina, 2013, p. 43). The narrator can make "identity claim[s]" (Bamberg, 1997, p. 340) of themselves that are more direct and can refer to personal characteristics (that don't necessarily fall into a specific social identity, but more on that later) that the narrator portrays, constructs, holds important, identifies with, whichever term one wants to use (Bamberg, 1997, pp. 336, 340). These identity claims can either go with or against the master narrative, which Bamberg shortly defines as what would be a typical or (socially shared) dominant narrative of the situation (Bamberg, 1997, pp. 337–340; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 385; Pöysä, 2009, p. 319). I will talk about master narratives in a little more detail later.

This level is also referred to as "a repertoire for new discourse settings and situations" (Bamberg, 2004, p. 348), "linking local talk with socio cultural processes" (De Fina, 2013, p. 58) "more general and enduring [identities]" (Deppermann, 2015, p. 374), "the self" (Hatoss, 2012, p. 51). As one can see, the level refers to a more constant or deeper understanding of the narrator's selfhood outside the narrating situation. In fact, De Fina (2013) acknowledges that there may be a cognitive factor playing into this level, a so-called "stable core", which ultimately "require something more" to figure out than just the storytelling situation the narrator is taking part in (p. 44). This idea of having a cognitive factor[2] in Level 3 positioning ties in nicely with Turner and Oakes's (1986) assertion that SIT holds onto the idea of different (group) identities having personal relevance to the person cognitively (p. 239). The similarities do not end there though. De Fina (2013) further continues her discussion of level 3 positioning by referring to the relevance out-groups have in the narration of selfhood (p. 55;

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[2] I am aware that for constructionists, the word *cognition* can be a bit of a *no-no word* (see Jost & Kruglanski, 2002). But I will not talk about cognitive relevance to the narrator in my own analyses. The material is incapable of providing any definitive answers to something like that.

see Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 240), as well as how it can refer to "census-like [social] categories" (De Fina, 2013, p. 56) through the discussion and doing of social actions and social identities (pp. 55–57).

As for criticism towards the concept of level 3 positioning, Pöysä (2009, pp. 319–320) does point out that the difference between level 3 positioning and the first two levels is slightly obscure. While De Fina (2013) also acknowledges that this is an argument that could be made, she argues that level 3 positioning gives a more in-depth view of *who* the people taking part in the narrative *are*. It delves deeper into the question of identity, social or otherwise (p. 43). As for De Fina's (2013) methods on how she can determine this, she has a plethora of data to work with that all relate to the data she uses in her analyses. Not only does she have various narratives from people, but she also has background data of their socio-economic statuses, real names, has actually interacted with them, and so on. Therefore Pöysä's (2009) comment about the obscurity of level 3 positioning does hold some weight, but I also believe that he has a different approach to the concept of identity. This does of course raise concern over how I can analyse my data at level 3 positioning, but I will stick to what is being said and brought up in the narratives, without the use of handy outside data giving more details about the narrators themselves. And this is where SIT will come in handy, as I will show later.

The concept of master narratives needs to be discussed. The concept might have to be included in some levels of research, but Bamberg's 1997 and (with co-author Georgakopoulou) 2008 articles using NPA leave the concept of master narratives as merely a mention, or might even not mention it at all (e.g. Bamberg, 2004). Bamberg does acknowledge the effects master narratives can have in discourse (e.g. Korobov & Bamberg, 2007), but they are not necessarily a pivotal point of research in positioning analysis. Other researchers have delved more deeply into master narratives (e.g. Hammack & Toolis, 2015), while simultaneously providing evidence of these master narratives existing (e.g. De Fina, 2013, p. 56) due to the criticism presented by constructionists that researchers have been arbitrarily attributing their own biased assumptions of *larger factors* playing a role in whatever they are researching (see Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, for reference). Similarly to Bamberg's approaches (1997, 2004; 2008 with Georgakopoulou) I will merely surmise of their possible effect in my own analysis, whenever relevant. Considering that I do not have any data outside the subreddit, I could potentially draw conclusions of the master narratives affecting the narratives of the narrators, but it would be limited to the master narrative of the subreddit, nothing more. Although it is possible to connect a Reddit user's narrative with overarching (master) narratives of depression (how it is talked about in public), it would be impossible to state that the narrator would have come in contact with that very same master narrative. Therefore the word *could* will be used when discussing possible connections.

4.3.4 Using narratives and positioning analysis with SIT

Narratives and positioning have been used with social identity theory (e.g. De Fina, 2013; Scuzzarello, 2015), concepts relating to SIT (e.g. Bamberg, 2010; Korobov & Bamberg, 2007), and discuss concepts that are similar to (if not the same as in) SIT, without referencing SIT itself (e.g. Bamberg, 1997; Deppermann, 2013; Korobov, 2010). The divide between constructionist and experimentalist approaches, as discussed by Jost and Kruglanski (2002), does not seem to be that prominent when studying narrative positioning and SIT in conjunction. In fact, the approaches contribute quite nicely to one another. Furthermore it is difficult to view these two approaches as somehow inherently different.

It would be much easier to just let the research speak for itself. Scuzzarello's (2015) view is that a narrative can contribute to SIT. She argues that it "confirms the assumption of SIT whereby a group can develop narratives about group characteristics which have a positively valued distinctiveness from the more powerful group" (p. 193). Not only that but narratives can also be a method "whereby the narrator attempts to change a negative image of their group", while narrative analysis itself is "a great way to see how social identities are contested and constructed, creating fluid ways of interpreting someone as belonging to group X, i.e. not a rigid definition, but can be assigned to people when appropriate", arguing that there is a need for a model that incorporates both SIT and narratives (p. 197; see Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, for further arguments). Self-positioning and contextual categories have a close relationship with the construction of one's social identity after all (Scuzzarello, 2015, p. 183).

De Fina's (2013) research gives further credence to the utilisation of SIT and narratives, positioning analysis in this case, in tandem. Her arguments should be quite clear by this subchapter, but as a bit of a recap, I shall (re-) present some of her research results here. At all levels of positioning analysis (see Bamberg, 1997, for reference) it can be noted that De Fina (2013) makes direct references to SIT, or references concepts that *might as well* be about SIT. For instance in her demonstration of **level 1** positioning analysis, she analysed a woman's, "Francisca's", narrative of the hardships she has faced at an English language learning centre. In the analysis, De Fina argues that the narrator and protagonist of the story is positioned as a "Latina", referring to an ethnic categorisation. The antagonists are positioned on the other hand as "African American girls" (see Liu & Hilton, 2005) [3]. "Latinas" are positioned in a more desirable role of "victim" whereas the "African American girls"

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[3] More specifically in relation to antagonism playing a role: "Self-categorization theory posits a functional antagonism between identities at different levels of inclusiveness, such that activation of an individual level of identity suppresses group level identity, and activation of group level identity suppresses personal identity" (Liu & Hilton, 2005, p. 547).

in an undesirable role of a "violent" perpetrator. De Fina interpreted this as "Francisca" positioning the "African American girls" as "being violent [which is] a typical trait of African American girls (at least those in the school)". (2013, pp. 52–53.) I previously wrote that a significant part of SIT (and SCT) is simplifications of out-groups (paraphrasing). "[A] typical trait" (De Fina, 2013, p. 53) is exactly this. Now the ethical implications of saying something like that are *up for grabs* so to speak. I for one will not say anything about it, since it is a narrative, an interpretation of that narrative, and an analysis of that interpretation made by someone else. Regardless, this part shows how the concepts of SIT (or SCT) and level 1 positioning analysis can work in tandem, even though De Fina (2013) does not make direct references to SIT/SCT in this part. The concepts are without a doubt related to SIT/SCT in any case.

At **level 2**, De Fina's (2013) analysis of the same narrative also makes references to a form of social identity and self/social category. De Fina argues that "Francisca" was forced to remain in her in-group, her perceived ethnicity, by the out-groups of the social situation (p. 54), an aspect which is one of the major aspects studied in SIT research (see Kus et al., 2013; Scuzzarello, 2015). At **level 3**, this quote from De Fina (2013) will be enough to explain its relevance to SIT: "this third level is necessary to deal with how narrators and audiences negotiate less locally produced senses of who they are, i.e. their membership into social identities, moral identities, etc." (p. 43). A more detailed explanation would be that De Fina makes numerous references to SIT, SCT, or the concepts related to them in her narrative positioning analysis of "Francisca's" accounts. Group membership, out-groups, intergroup conflict, identification with group membership, attributing specific characteristics to different social categories or groups (p. 55), social identities, social action, membership to different social groups, social behaviour and attributes related to ethnicity and "*race*" [4], census-like categories, ethnic and "*racial*" division (p. 56), and so on, all relate to SIT either directly or relate to the concepts used in SIT. All of these terms are either used directly as is, or have been used in another, yet synonymous, form in SIT (and SCT) research (c.f. chapter 2 in this thesis).

Even Bamberg himself has used concepts resembling or directly from SIT, in his own narrative research. In his 2010 article Bamberg studies identity formation within narrative positioning. Although it should be noted that Bamberg (2010) does not follow his own narrative positioning analysis (e.g. 1997), rather redefines what positioning means in the 2010 article's specific context (p. 8). He makes it clear how important he sees positioning in relation to other people, an action which is achieved through the use of social categories. In fact, Bamberg states: "Drawing on group

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[4] I personally *loathe* the concept of "race", and prefer to avoid using that term at all times. Unfortunately I could not avoid it this time.

membership categories, it has been claimed, establishes the basic link between individual sense of self and social dimensions—irrespective of whether this link is considered to be of a more cognitive nature […]" (pp. 6–7), referencing what Tajfel (e.g. 1969) has studied, and what I have previously presented of Turner and Oakes's (1986) research (c.f. chapter 2 in this thesis). Bamberg (2010) continues on to explain that the cultural reality people are surrounded by "gives narrative a powerful role in the process of seeing life as a story" (p. 10). Additionally, it can be argued that there is a cognitive factor that plays a part in the organisation of personal experiences into a narrative form (p. 11).

Although Bamberg (2010) argues that his approach in the article in question is different from his approach to narrative positioning analysis (see e.g. 1997), personally, I had difficulties distinguishing the 2010 approach from the 1997 one[5] (see Bamberg, 2010, p. 12, for reference). Although making that distinction is quite inconsequential in order to make this point of mine. The point being that concepts derived from, or similar to SIT's (and SCT's), have been used in tandem with narrative and positioning analysis, and in the case of Bamberg (2010), I have one more part I wish to discuss. Namely what he argues on pages 15–16, that being people's tendency to position their characters and themselves as more or less similar to the one another within their narratives. Although it should be brought up that Bamberg argues "I introduced the assumption that neither self (or sense of self) nor identity is defined (or definable) in terms of fixed positions that are a priori, pre-discursively, rationally defined" (p. 15), which could be used to argue *against* the use of SIT. On the other hand Bamberg goes onto argue the point I brought up about emphasising differences and similarities almost immediately after that. And before that had argued how narratives and positions draw from what essentially amounts to SCT (see previous paragraph).

So not only has Bamberg (2010) argued that using SIT, or concepts similar to it, in tandem with positioning analysis is a valid way to study narratives, Korobov too has used concepts relating to SIT in his joint analysis with Bamberg (2007) of male children's narratives. After their introductory chapter, Korobov and Bamberg (2007) use the term "to do not only social interaction, but also social identities" in reference to the narratives and positions the male children used in the study (p. 256). Additionally Korobov and Bamberg discussed how the male children position characters in their narratives "by orienting to the relevant features of social identities, and how such positioning is accomplished in the performance of certain kinds of event descriptions and evaluations" (p. 267).

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[5] "[A] speaker/writer accounts for how s/he (i) has emerged (as character) over time, (ii) as different from (but same as) others, and simultaneously (iii) can account for how s/he views him-/herself as a (responsible) agent." (Bamberg, 2010, p. 12).

They continue by arguing that the children's act of positioning as representatives of a specific social identity within their narratives, was made in order to "preempt and deflect possible counters" to said social identity; to use descriptors and represent themselves in a way "that matter most in the performance of social identities" (p. 269).

Scuzzarello's (2015) article has been of great help to this thesis in her assertion that narratives and SIT go quite nicely together. She does point to some criticism of SIT as well as SCT and their reliance on what she describes as convenient generalisations (p. 182). She sees that by using narratives as a method of studying people's social identities, the *convenient generalisations* have a much stronger standing in determining what the person sees as their in- and out-groups. In fact, by utilising narratives as a method of studying SIT (or how people construct their social identities through narratives), Scuzzarello found support for the (SIT) argument that people would tend to portray group belongingness to an in-group with a more positive attribution (p. 193; see Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 240, for reference). Following this train of thought, another argument is presented by Scuzzarello (2015), where she discusses how narratives can also be used as a means of changing negative views of one's group(s), a concept that comes from SIT (p. 196; see Tajfel & Turner, 2004, p. 279, for reference). Narrative analysis, according to Scuzzarello (2015), can be effectively used to determine or study the construction and contesting of social identity (-ies) (see e.g. Reed, 2002, p. 246). Through this type of combination, social identities can easily be seen as "fluid" and plastic, along with how people could distance themselves from unwanted group memberships with another person or other people. (p. 197.) Scuzzarello argues that there is a need for a model that incorporates both SIT and narratives (2015, p. 197; see Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, for reference).

Following my previous point about master narratives, Hammack and Toolis (2015) went as far as to say that the previous literature they reviewed on the concept of master narratives was "virtually identical" to the theories of identity they researched, among which SIT was discussed (p. 358). They used the terms "social categories" and "events" as well as "groups" to define the contents of master narratives (p. 354) among other terms, these being the more important ones. They further continued their argument by stating how "the identity development process fundamentally involves a competition of value-laden discourses with implications for power and status" is consistent with the premise of SIT (p. 355). This argument becomes clearer in their own analyses of Israeli narratives about the current situation in Jerusalem, and how social identities position the narrator so that they adhere to a "power structure in society", referring to the expectations an Israeli social identity would have on the one creating a narrative of the situation (p. 356). Hammack and Toolis continue on to make a point I have been arguing for quite a while now: "[W]e hope that future narrative research

might find cause for mutual enrichment and the value of converging, complementary evidence about human development and experience" (p. 360). Indeed I assume it is safe to conclude by now that narratives and SIT/SCT are quite complementary to one another. So I shall put it to the test in the next segment.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Analysis of "Have martial arts helped anyone here?"

The opening post (OP) of this topic reads:

> "*I'd just like to hear from people who've seen positive changes in their lives after taking up a martial art.*
>
> *For me, I've always had anxiety and self-esteem issues due to my shortness (and some ex-friends' constant belittling due to said shortness,) but right when I started boxing, I found that it was actually harder for me to go back to those toxic ways of thinking. I don't know, maybe something about getting punched in the face helped me get over myself. I think the running helped too.*"

5.1.1 Level 1: How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the narrative?

The OP starts with a description of the *positive properties* "taking up a martial art" has on life. In other words, *martial arts* are seen as a force that has a positive effect on the protagonist (i.e. the narrator). At the same time the narrator positions *martial arts* in a way that has a positive effect on the lives of others as well, or at least limits the narrator's desired replies to the ones that have had that. The narrator continues by stating that there have been negative forces affecting the narrator's selfhood, "shortness" which has led to anxiety and self-esteem issues. These factors are also prominent in master narratives of depression in general, anxiety and self-esteem issues being a considerable part of *being* depressed (see Cruwys et al., 2014; Kessler et al., 1999; McPherson & Armstrong, 2009, for reference). The narrator follows by stating in the parenthesis that he or she has been the subject of a *betrayal* by people who were supposed to be his or her allies, but turned out to be antagonists that *belittled* the narrator ("*ex-friend[s]*"). This type of situation can be approached through the lens of SIT (& SCT). In SIT, friendship is considered an indicator of belonging to an in-group. While the reasons for the friendship are not explained here, it would be accurate to conclude that becoming an *ex-friend* is due to disrespectful comments, possibly as an attempt to out-group categorise the narrator ("*constant belittling*"). Something quite unfitting of a lasting in-grouping among friends. (see Tajfel & Turner, 2004, for reference.) Naturally there may be other factors playing into the eventual out-grouping of the narrator and their (ex-) friends, but those are not disclosed here.

The narrator continues by explaining that "boxing" has been a helping force in avoiding "those toxic ways of thinking" for him or her. *Toxic ways of thinking*, on the other hand, are a *pitfall* the narrator needs to avoid in order to keep having a more *positive change* in their life. The narrator follows with

a comic exclamation that by "getting punched in the face", an action that would usually be considered hostile and unfitting a narrative of positivity, they were able to "get over" themselves. Hostility is considered a clear out-group action in SIT (see Tajfel & Turner, 2004, for reference), but it would be safe to assume from this narrative that *in boxing* (in situ), the act of *punching* another practitioner "in the face" is not considered a hostile act; in fact it would seem like, in the narrative, it would have an opposite reaction to harm: Healing. Therefore the *punch to the face* was a narrative tool that *may have* helped the protagonist, the narrator, defeat the main antagonist of the narrative: Themselves. Additionally it would be safe to assume that the person doing the *face-punching* is not an out-group member, but an in-group member of the boxing gym the narrator attends. Interestingly enough, this would make an objectively aggressive action a sign of group belonging rather than hostility, at least in the context of sparring[6].

5.1.2 Level 2: How does the narrator position themselves in relation to the audience?

At level 2, the narrator positions him- or herself and the audience as martial artists, people who have had "positive changes", and asks only for comments that have had that change ("I'd **just like to hear** from people **who've seen**[…]"). Martial artists being an in-group in this case, or a social category, as opposed to those who do not practice martial arts. Following this, the narrator positions themselves as a person to be pitied in relation to the audience who have been positioned in an implicit manner as those that would be feeling sorry for the narrator. At the same time the audience is positioned as more of an in-group than the narrator's *ex-friends*, making a clear distinction between the ones reading that narrative and the ones that *belittled* the narrator, forcing an out-group categorisation of said *ex-friends*. It would seem that the audience is positioned so that they would condemn the behaviour of the *ex-friends* and feel a sense of *taking sides* with the narrator, another feature of SIT (see De Fina, 2013, for reference) and a case of "*we* VS. *they*" (Bamberg, 1997, p. 339, original emphasis).

The narrator continues on with an explanation of how boxing prevents falling into "those toxic ways of thinking", alluding to a possible master narrative of what *toxic thinking* is, which the audience would be aware of. At least in the sentence structure it is feasible to conclude that the audience would have some pre-existing knowledge of what it entails to think like that, making the positioning of the audience as if they had expertise in that field or way of thought (refer to Bamberg's, 1997, level 2

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[6] Sparring is an act of practicing techniques with and against another practitioner. Different martial arts do this as a method of becoming better at their martial art and learn how to use the techniques they have learned in a situation practically. Sparring is a major part of the boxing curriculum universally, therefore it is safe to assume that the face-punching happened in a sparring setting, implied by the narrator. (Price, 1867)

positioning analysis, p. 339: "[E]xpert on the topic […]"). The last part of the paragraph seems to allude to some type of master narrative that might be prevalent on the EOOD subreddit. What I mean is that the act of *getting over oneself* seems to be presented without more background information as to what that would entail. Indeed it seems like it is presented as just common knowledge for the audience. This could also be in reference to master narratives of depression, where the self is a major contributor to the vicious circle of depression (see e.g. Romakkaniemi, 2011; Cruwys et al., 2014, for reference), and at the same time would function as an assertion of group-membership with the audience, due to being privy to such master narratives and knowing what the people on EOOD (*we*) are talking about. Something which would not be as obvious to those *outside* EOOD (*they*; refer to Bamberg, 1997; Postmes et al., 1995).

5.1.3 Level 3: How does the narrator position themselves in relation to themselves?

As I previously discussed, level 3 positioning analyses the *background identity* the narrator has. Considering I do not have any background information of the narrators, one would have every right to wonder how I could make any claims in this case. Well, I can of course analyse the identity claims that portray a more dominant self-concept within the narrative, claims which do not fall into the other two levels. The accuracy of this analysis should be taken with a grain of salt, though. This is a weakness in my method of analysis and the data I am using, but I shall discuss this in more detail later. I am a little worried if I can produce strong enough results from my analysis here, but that evaluation will remain to be seen at a later date. Without further ado, I shall present my interpretations of level 3 positioning analysis.

Similarly to level 1 positioning, the narrator positions themselves as a person who has had problems in the past with *negative thoughts*. The sentence "I've **always had** anxiety and self-esteem issues" explicitly states that the narrator has had a consistent negative self-image for quite some time, until they took up a martial art that is: Boxing. Boxing then led to a new self-image, to someone who can safely self-categorise themselves as a person who has a *hard time* going back to "those toxic ways of thinking". This could refer to a general view that a person can be categorised as mentally healthy or strong if they do not have a negative self-image, or have an emotionally stable social life, if they do not have so called *friends* who *belittle* their supposed *friend* (see e.g. Craft & Perna, 2004, for reference). While it is not explicitly stated that the narrator considers their self-category as that of an emotionally/mentally balanced individual, it is implied that they feel better. Although what is explicitly stated is that the narrator has "seen positive changes" in their life thanks to boxing. Boxing

being something that prevents the narrator from going back to the previous self-category of a person who suffers from a negative self-image.

This is not perfect, though, ("*I found that it was actually hard__er__ for me to go back to those toxic ways of thinking*"; emphasis added) and there is room to err back to "those toxic ways of thinking". Nonetheless the narrator does portray a social identity that is in-line with others who have a positive/healthy self-image (e.g. Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 218) as well as a stereotypical view of martial artists' humility for *getting over themselves* through humbling acts (i.e. getting "punched in the face"). While the part about "running helped too" seems to be added as a bit of an afterthought, it could also be considered an identifying claim to the narrator's assertion of their social identity as a boxer, a martial artists, and a member of the EOOD subreddit. I am not fully aware of how prevalent running is as a method of *getting over depression* (if it were to be this simply put) within the EOOD subreddit community, but considering the fact that in my material I have running mentioned as a factor in every excerpt (anecdotal, I know) and the fact that in numerous research results running is used as a method of measuring mental health among depressed individuals (e.g. Craft & Perna, 2004; Kruisdijk, Hendriksen, Tak, Beekman, and Hopman-Rock, 2012; Mehnert et al., 2011; Nishida, Kikuchi, Fukuda & Kato, 2016; Schnohr, Kristensen, Prescott & Scharling, 2005), it would not be that farfetched to consider the mention of "running" as a potential (social) identity claim, or at least relating to a master narrative of a depressed person's mental health getting better.

In summary, the narrator portrays themselves as someone who has dealt with self-esteem issues and anxiety, categorising themselves as a person who belongs to a group of people who have a negative self-image. This has been exacerbated through an incorrect inclusion to an in-group that belittles the narrator, causing the narrator to consider the in-group as an out-group currently ("*ex-friends*"). The narrator then makes (social) identity claims portending to social identities and categories of martial artists, boxers, and survivors (of negative factors affecting mental health), while simultaneously owning a form of humility and implying they have come to terms with their alleged shortness. The narrator does not imply that they themselves think they are short and may have been unwillingly categorised as such by out-group members (see De Fina, 2013, p. 57, for reference).

5.2 Analysis of "23M- decided it's finally time to snap out of it"

The opening post (OP) of this topic states:

> "*Saw this sub linked in an AskReddit thread, and it immediately hit home for me. At one point in my life I was a pretty successful college track athlete, but after graduating a couple years ago I've had*

difficulty keeping myself in a routine of working out. Having mandatory practices every day were the best thing that I could do for my mental health, and losing that has been difficult for me.

I've struggled with depression for years, and it gets really bad when I'm not exercising daily. I get into a cycle of running every day for a couple weeks, and then not doing anything for months. For the past year or so (whenever I've been in one of my upswings) I've been doing some biking and swimming along with running in the hopes of becoming a triathlete, but I've had a terrible time sticking with a routine and ultimately end up back in bed for 14 hours a day.

Last night I took some sleeping medication and fell asleep before midnight for the first time in months, and got up at 7:30 this morning to go for a run. This was huge for me, as I hadn't been out of bed before 11 in a long time (thankfully I have a job that is very lenient about my hours). Right now I have the same optimism that I always do right when I start working out again, but I want to know how to keep going. How do you guys stay motivated when depression symptoms can pop up randomly at any point in time?"

5.2.1 Level 1: How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the narrative?

From the topic title itself it is already possible to determine positioning at level 1. In the topic title, the narrator positions the protagonist, himself[7] as a person who is no longer affected by a bigger outside force (of nature so to speak): He "decided it's finally time to snap out of it", having the capacity to get out of a *rut* and being able to affect his life. He continues in the first paragraph with an insight as to what type of character the protagonist used to be, creating a type of origin story for the character in order to explain whatever drama is about to unfold. The protagonist *used to be* "a pretty successful college track athlete", referring to a bygone social identity and category of being a student ("college") and in good shape ("successful […] track athlete"). This creates a bit of an in-between identities situation for the protagonist as their reality had changed from what it was "a couple years ago". Now the protagonist cannot rely on "[h]aving mandatory practices everyday", which kept the looming danger of their "mental health" from getting worse. In this sense, *graduating from college* could be seen as the antagonist of the story, or an agent that caused a domino effect for the protagonist, who had relied on the safety of their social identity as a "college track athlete" to keep the *evil force* of depression at bay.

The narrator reveals that the protagonist has been *struggling* with keeping these *evil forces* from taking over, which his social identity and self-category of a *student athlete* helped prevent. As if the protagonist was running after his lost identity for "two weeks", not being capable of catching up to it,

_____

[7] The "M" part of "23M" means *Male*.

arriving at a social identity mismatch, and eventually giving up "for months". The protagonist is positioned as someone who is not necessarily struggling against a corporeal opponent, rather the abstract, yet present manifestation of his own inability to be the person he was in the past, not having a positively evaluated group to call his in-group. Now he is defined by the narrator, himself, as having the categorisations of *depressed*, a person who gives up, and is flung around by forces greater than himself: *upswings and downswings*. The protagonist is positioned as someone who cannot take control of himself, regardless of his aspirations to self-categorise himself into a new social group: That of the triathlete.

Eventually the protagonist receives what could be defined as a *magic elixir* or *tool* that helps him on his quest to become an athlete, to grab hold of his past glory yet again. The "sleeping medication" helps him fall asleep and keep to the old routine he had during his "college track athlete" days, instead of falling into a rut again. While potential issues of drug dependency during depression could be raised (e.g. Kruisdijk et al., 2012, p. 6), I do not feel like it is important for this analysis, nor any of my business in the first place. The protagonist, in any case, has (possibly) unknowing allies enabling him to keep chasing after the identity of an athlete which seems to be an adequate fit for him, in the form of his work ("lenient […] hours"). The protagonist has countered the evil force of depression with his newfound "optimism" and routine, for now. Yet the threat of the evil force, *depression*, still looms in the background and the narrator sets up the possibility of its return. This force is something unpredictable and "can pop up randomly at any point in time". This positions the protagonist so that they will always be in danger, giving the impression that him pulling through and surviving the danger, is all the more impressive. And in order to be ready for the next time, he seeks allegiance with a new social group, the EOOD subreddit's community.

5.2.2 Level 2: How does the narrator position himself in relation to the audience?

Similarly to level 1 positioning, level 2 positioning can also be seen from the topic title already. "23M" positions the narrator as a male who is the right age to have recently graduated (setting up to the narrative of student athlete and graduation), simultaneously allowing the audience to accept the narrative through positioning. The topic title can be seen as *contextual* in the sense that "it" can be easily deduced to mean *depression*. This on the other hand has a positioning effect on the people of EOOD, where they are positioned as in-group members privy to what the narrator means by "it" through the mere act of the topic title alone. In other words the narrator could assume that the people reading the topic title are of the social categories *depressed* and *exercising out of depression* (hence EOOD). Due to these similarities between the narrator and the audience, it would be safe to conclude

that the narrator sees himself as belonging to the same social categories, possibly even social identity, and not needing to explain what he means by "it". Naturally it would be incorrect to state that the meaning could not be determined from the mere context of the topic, as I have done even though I do not belong to those social categories nor subscribe to EOOD. But to truly understand what "it" means, what it means to be depressed or suffer from depression, it is safe to state that the narrator might expect the readers to be able to relate at least to some degree, as can be seen from the tone of the topic as well as the last sentence (see Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998; Rosenblatt & Greenberg, 1991, for reference).

The seemingly assumed community connection continues in his first sentence, where he mentions an "AskReddit thread" without really explaining what it is. Through this act it can be concluded that the narrative positions the audience as people who belong to a social group of Reddit user, sharing that same social category. The narrator then continues by positioning himself as a "pretty successful college track athlete" which could be seen as a distancing act from the audience's assumed past(s), but I lack the data to make this deduction conclusive. Nonetheless the story arc appears to have a theme of downfall, and the fall or bottom of this arc seems to be assumed as a unifying feature of the intended audience, by the narrator. In other words the narrative starts off with a self-position of being different to people on average with an underlying unifying feature that is being inhibited by the aforementioned self-position. The narrative then continues as if the fairy tale of a "pretty successful college track athlete" ends due to graduating from college. This graduation then forces the narrator to reposition himself as no longer a track athlete or student, giving way to a positioning act of being more similar to those of the EOOD community who suffer with depression and (have) struggle(d) to keep their motivation. Through this act the audience is therefore positioned as people who have both suffered from depression and struggled with motivation.

Of note is that the narrator does not try to excuse his failures or personal shortcomings, when describing how he tends to give up with exercise, unlike what can be seen in Bamberg (1997). This could of course be a side-effect of the brutal honesty often associated with depressed individuals, especially pessimism towards oneself (e.g. Cruwys et al., 2015, p. 66). Nonetheless it positions the narrator as someone who owns up to his failures, while simultaneously positioning the audience as people who can cast judgment on the narrator (e.g. Scuzzarello, 2015), or expects the audience to be sympathetic listeners (e.g. De Fina, 2013).

The last part of the previous subchapter has implications to a dual-effect in the action of asking the EOOD community for advice. It positions the audience simultaneously as the protagonist's allies in level 1 (as characters in the narrative, a clever use of language by the narrator) as well as attributing

a (level 2) position of taking the narrator's/protagonist's side on the matter as an audience of the narrative itself. The audience is encouraged not to just be a passive audience who merely listens to the told narrative, but rather become part of the narrative itself, as people who ally themselves with the protagonist, who steer the hero in the right direction and prevent them from giving into evil forces. At the same time it seems like the narrator assumes the audience has some type of authority on the matter of "stay[ing] motivated". In other words, the narrator positions himself as a person in need of teaching, a student, whereas the audience is positioned as those with the knowledge to help the narrator, which could be defined as teacher (this can also be seen in reverse: Bamberg, 1997).

5.2.3 Level 3: How does the narrator position himself in relation to himself?

As with levels 1 and 2, level 3 positioning can be seen from the topic title. The narrator positions himself as having agency over his mentality: "[I] deci**ded**". This sends a strong message that the stereotypical lack of control and decisiveness over oneself associated with depression, does not apply to the narrator (e.g. Kim & Park, 2015). The "23M" part of the topic title are self-identifiers, signifying that he is a male in his twenties. Though this has more to do with level 2 positioning, it would be incorrect to not take this into consideration as well at level 3, although low hanging fruit it may be. He then continues by expressing that the "AskReddit thread" reminded him of a deeper connection the topic had to his past. His current social identity would still entail that he is highly educated, yet has a mismatch with the social identity of a "college track athlete". Of course it is natural that people graduate, but it would be safe to assume that losing mandatory practices caused the protagonist to lose something which had control over his life and was moving it in a pleasing direction.

What can be concluded is that the social identity of an athlete holds a deep significance to the narrator himself. As can be already determined from my analysis of level 1 positioning, a type of circular turn of events can be discerned from the narrative. The narrator has been trying to get back to his identity of an athlete, which was a significant part of his wellbeing during his college years. Eventually he managed to do that. While not exactly the same ("college track athlete" VS *triathlete*), the potential for self-categorising himself as an athlete again, can reasonably be concluded from his narrative journey. While it would be impossible to undeniably make assessments of its importance to the narrator from just this narrative, it is safe to make an educated assumption that it at least holds some importance to him. Be that due to a necessity of having a positive social identification as opposed to that of a depressed person (e.g. Cruwys et al., 2014), having a desire to figuratively go back to when things felt better for him as opposed to the emotional stress being depressed brings (e.g. Cruwys et

al., 2015), recognising the positive effects routine and frequent exercise have on depressed individuals (e.g. Kessler et al., 1999), and so on.

As a bit of a contradiction to what I analysed in the first paragraph of this subchapter, the narrator eventually reveals that he also relies on "sleeping medication" to have control over himself (see Bandura, 2001; Flick, Garms-Homolová, & Röhnsch, 2012; Redden, Tracy & Shafer, 2013, for reference). It would be impossible to determine whether or not the narrator intended this part to go against his positioning as a person who is fully in charge of himself, or if taking sleeping medication is the act of being in charge of one's own body and mind for him. The phrase "medication" is also of note here, since people colloquially use the term sleeping *pills* to refer to sleeping aides. It could possibly be an intentional phrasing so as to distance itself from the word *drugs*, which is associated with drug dependency, another unfortunate consequence of depression for many people (Nunes & Levin, 2004). Regardless, having to rely on medication is often seen as dependency and not being in complete control over oneself, but it would be impossible to determine if the narrator is aware of this type of master narrative (e.g. Schieffer et al., 2005), if he disagrees with it, finds it irrelevant, or intentionally leaves it out to fit his overarching narrative of *taking back control of himself*. It should be noted here that this is not to say that the narrator is wrong to say he is in control of himself due to using sleeping medication. Still, considering how reliance on medication is talked about (e.g. Schieffer et al., 2005), it is an important factor to bring up. And in the narrator's defence, he could also see it as a method of taking control of an unruly self that is being affected by emotions related to depression.

That said, there is no doubt that the narrator has been empowered by his ability to fall asleep and wake up early (which would give further credence to the conclusion that the narrator sees that sleeping medication is not dependency), which, as he states, has allowed him to "have the same optimism that I always do right when I start working out again […]". The word "optimism" and the attitude portrayed here does not fall in line with stereotypical conceptualisations of what a depressed person is like (i.e. having optimism in the first place; see Cruwys et al., 2015). In other words, while the narrator still positions himself as a person with the social identity of *depressed person*, his comment veers off from the image of what a depressed person is like, portraying that, while he still has some features that represent being in the same social group as depressed people, his narratively positioned identity is more in line with the social identity he had in the past of an "athlete". Hence it is safe to assume that due to the mismatch of his post-graduate reality with the pre-graduate social identity ("pretty successful college track athlete"), the narrator was left with another dominant characteristic ("I've struggled with depression for years"), which forced him to relate more with the social category

of *being depressed*. Now with his newfound optimism and control, he can self-categorise as an athlete, or someone aspiring to be one ("the hopes of becoming a triathlete").

5.3 Analysis of "How exercise helps my depression"

The opening post (OP) of this topic states:

> "*This is a very personal post. What works for me might not work for you. In fact we have had several people post in this sub that exercise makes their depression worse not better. Everyone is different, buyer beware and all that.*
>
> *I think that exercise helps in several different ways. The most obvious is that it causes the release of dopamine and other 'happy chemicals' in your brain as you work out. Thats the 'runners high' It can feel wonderful, you feel like you could go ten rounds with Mike Tyson in his prime, lift a new PB without trying or run forever. A word of warning. It doesn't always kick in no matter what you do, some people never seem to get it at all. If you base your recovery on getting a natural high and it doesn't happen you are going to be disappointed.*
>
> *Personally I hardly ever get the runner high so why exercise? For me its all about taking the motivation, determination, dedication and discipline I have learned through working out and applying them to the rest of my life. Depression makes me apathetic and demotivated. I can procrastinate for hours or even days. On a bad day I just stay in bed. However if I can take the motivation that got me to work out and the feeling I got when I beat a PR and apply that to getting some code debugged or what ever then I am winning.*
>
> *One more way in which exercise helps me is with mindfulness. The flavour of the month with regards to mental health issues. I personally use t'ai chi for this, you might use yoga or something similar. Even lifting weights can be mindful as you are concentrating so fully on what you are doing in order to maintain good form and not hurt yourself.*
>
> *A word of warning. No one is perfect. There will be days when you don't want to exercise. Thats fine. Even professional athletes have days like that. The trick is to say to yourself "This will pass" and get back to it when you can. That's a good thing to say with depression in general.*"

5.3.1 Level 1: How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the narrative?

The topic title alone already tells a story. That of a protagonist who is a success story of the respective subreddit. The second sentence of the topic text itself does position the protagonist as potentially different to the norm: "[It] might not work for you." This gives way to the possibility that, regardless of a shared social identity of EOOD subreddit users, there can be discernible differences between the

audience and the protagonist, be that due to biological factors or further different identities, social or individual. These are key-factors in SCT (see Turner & Oakes, 1986, for reference). The sentence immediately after that positions some previous posters in the EOOD subreddit as other characters in the narrative: "**we** have had several people post in this sub that exercise makes their depression worse" (emphasis added). The other characters are in a type of paradoxical position, where the core assumption is that they have come to the subreddit to feel better through exercise, *yet cannot connect with the desired social identity's core message* of exercise helping with their depression; unlike what the narrator has experienced as can be seen from the topic title. We could then start to follow Turner and Oakes's (1986) as well as Haslam's (2004) SCT conceptualisation(s), where self-categories begin to have limitations, possibly biological (as can be seen from the next paragraph) to the adoption of potential social identities. In other words, they cannot identify with the desired social identity due to being (physically) incapable of following the message of the group: Feeling better through exercise.

The next sentence shows how, regardless of the shared social identity of exercising out of depression, all characters of the narrative, protagonist included, are positioned to have some implicit differences regardless of social identity, category, desire to belong, etcetera (see SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 2004, for reference). In the next paragraph the narrator builds the protagonist's character more by stating how, to the protagonist, exercise is seen as a helpful force in order to continue their quest to feel better from a type of opposing force, depression. One could call this a battle between good and evil, but Bamberg (1997) never truly uses this terminology, although subtle hints can be seen (see p. 337: "[…] the central character who is at the mercy of outside (quasi "natural") forces […]"). The narrator then creates an image of how truly powerful the protagonist feels they are when they reach a goal, the runner's high, in that they could even fight Mike Tyson in his prime[8]. Mike Tyson's addition creates a world where his prowess is highly respected, making him into an unbelievable obstacle to overcome. The protagonist feels so good for beating a personal record that they believe they could actually go the distance with a highly acclaimed and skilled boxing heavy weight champion; the protagonist being key here, not the narrator themselves, as the wording does point to the suspension of disbelief. Mike Tyson is not an antagonist though, rather a respected and unrealistic goal.

The next paragraph in the narrative positions the protagonist as someone who has an unexpected reason for partaking in the EOOD social identification. It isn't about the runner's high anymore so much as it is about demanding strength of character from them. And even though the protagonist does

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[8] Mike Tyson: A retired boxer from the United States of America. He held multiple heavy weight boxing titles. At his prime he is considered to be one of the best boxers ever. His signature aggressive style is widely considered a very effective way of boxing, as can be seen from Mike Tyson's impressive record. (McIntyre, 2014)

struggle with bouts of depression, the protagonist can still justify remaining in that social identity of a person who exercises out of depression, if not only through their positive personal characteristics. Bamberg (1997) describes this type of characterisation of the protagonist as "the central character who is […] rewarded by luck, fate, or **personal qualities** (such as bravery, nobility, or simply "character")." (p. 337, emphasis added). Positioning the protagonist as having a type of strength of character can similarly be seen in De Fina's (2013) analysis where the person being interviewed, a Latina by the pseudonym Francisca, positions the main character, herself, as possessing enviable positive attributes as opposed to the antagonists of her narrative, and indeed struggling against a strong outside force of ethnic segregation in her language school (also Bamberg, 1997, p. 337: "the central character [is] helplessly at the mercy of [outside forces]").

5.3.2 Level 2: How does the narrator position themselves in relation to the audience?

From the title it can be seen that the narrator positions themselves in relation to the audience as someone who can identify in the social category of exercise having helped with depression, which the audience may not be, as the narrator has noted afterwards, or will potentially get motivated to self-categorise as from the topic. The first sentence in the topic "[t]his is a very personal post" positions the audience in a role where their replies could do some personal harm to the narrator. Simultaneously it frames the audience's replies to be sensitive about how they can respond and should take the post. Following this the narrator states that the narrative to-be-told is not a cure-all of depression and positions the audience in a way that they should be critical of its effects on them, effects which do not always help the protagonist either, as can be seen later on in the narrative. This similar position of being cautious and sceptical is presented by the narrator again at the end of the paragraph: "buyer beware". The narrator hence positions themselves in relation to the audience as a case where exercise *has helped* and is an authority in this specific case, but at the same time cannot guarantee that they are an authority on the matter *with all the answers* so to speak. Bamberg's (1997) analysis of young girls talking about the taboo subject of phone sex, argued that the girls were presenting themselves as experts on sexuality (p. 339) quite similarly to what the narrator in this instance portrays, although the narrator warns that they do not hold all the answers. Simultaneously the audience is positioned to accept the narrator's experiences, but be critical about them at the same time, as was previously mentioned.

Later on the narrator positions themselves in relation to the audience as someone who is privy to knowledge that the audience is not, that is, knows of an underlying danger in having high expectations about *the elusive runner's high*: "A word of warning." This has a similar tone to the previous

paragraph, where I explain how the narrator positions themselves as an authority within this social identity, while simultaneously cautioning the audience that it might not always work as expected. Therefore the audience are positioned so that they would be wise to follow this sage advice from the narrator, lest be left in disappointment of never achieving the *runner's high*, as can be seen from the end of the same paragraph, which could be interpreted as taking the narrative *with a grain of salt*. The narrator continues and mentions "mindfulness". This seems to have a hint of an out-grouping attempt within the social group of EOOD, by the narrator positioning themselves as understanding the humour in bringing "mindfulness" up as a valid method due to it being "The flavour of the month", while simultaneously positioning the audience so that they would understand what is so humorous about it (in-grouping). The narrator positions themselves and the audience so that they can accept mindfulness's role as a bit of a fad, but at the same time it can be discerned that *mindfulness* does have at least some validity for the narrator, which could relate to a master narrative (more on this in level 3). This could be interpreted as expecting the audience to accept mindfulness's role as a bit finicky due to its status as *flavour of the month*, yet still holding merit behind it.

The narrator continues by positioning themselves in relation to the audience as potentially having different interests, alluding to an interest in martial arts (I say this due to the mention of defeating Mike Tyson), which the narrator understands could be different to what others may want, possibly referencing a trend on the subreddit itself moving towards exercise that are not that directly related to martial arts. This in turn has a distancing effect within the social identity, where the positioning of the self and audience works as a self-categorisation to different interest groups (see Turner & Oakes, 1986, for reference), even though their shared social identity is that of a person who exercises out of depression. This can also be seen in Bamberg's (1997) level 2 positioning of teenage girls, where the narrator creates distance within her narratives among the other girls in the narrative, even though they could be seen as possessing the same social identity, young girls from the same school and the same friend group (in-group).

By the end of the narrative the narrator positions themselves so that the audience would potentially see the narrator as a type of compassionate person who has experienced what the audience potentially has experienced, or currently is experiencing. It can be seen that the narrator possibly self-categorises as a pseudo authority within the social identity of an EOOD subreddit member, an authority who wants to see the audience succeed, creating a supportive and comfortable environment for the audience to learn and build a social identity that allows for in-grouping with the narrator. While it cannot be concluded that the motive of the narrative is to allow for in-grouping actions from the audience, the audience can be seen as having more tools to do so after the narrative. A message can

be read between the lines as encouragement to not give up on exercising to feel better while struggling with depression, even if the *runner's high* doesn't kick in; and along with it, being capable of holding onto the social identification of exercising out of depression, if not merely thanks to just the act itself. As the narrator themselves explains, they do not always feel good, nor represent an optimal case of how exercise can help, yet they could still self-categorise as a person who has had help from exercise.

5.3.3 Level 3: How does the narrator position themselves in relation to themselves?

As with levels 1 and 2, level 3 positioning is also present in the topic title itself. In it the narrator positions themselves as someone who has had issues with depression and self-categorises as depressed. Simultaneously the narrator positions themselves as someone who has a strong enough will and motivation to feel better from depression, as can be seen from what they write afterwards. This might refer to a strength of character that pre-exists outside the narrative (level 3) positioning. The narrator also argues biological factors that come into play with exercise and depression, referring to brain chemistry: "[exercise] causes the release of dopamine and other 'happy chemicals' in your brain as you work out." This is similar to Bamberg's (1997) analysis of pregnant women who positioned themselves as an authority on the matter, going so far as to disagree even with their doctors (p. 340). While the narrator in my example does not go against what a health-care professional could state, they do present themselves as an expert on the matter. The reason why could be just that the narrator believes they have a right to present themselves as an authority on the matter due to having suffered from depression, but this line of argument ultimately needs more information.

The line of argument portraying a self-categorisation, intentional or unintentional, of authority on the matter, continues with the narrator's assessment of "some people never seem to get it at all." This seems to portend to personally gathered case studies, effectively giving their self-categorisation of an authority, or expert, again intentional or unintentional, a stronger base. Not only are they presenting a single case of themselves, they are referring to a larger amount of people whom the narrator seems to have noted as *not* getting a *runner's high*. This type of representation of wider case studies was also analysed by De Fina (2013) in her analysis of Francisca, a Latina who had negative experiences at a language school. In De Fina's analysis, she noted that Francisca referred to the prevalence of her case in that of what other Latinas had experienced in the same language school, as if to give more credence to the argument (2013, p. 52). Presenting oneself as an authority on a matter is by no means *a bad thing*. Considering the narrative and that the narrator themselves has struggled with depression, it seems like a natural progression for them to portray themselves as an expert on the matter for their stance to be believable (see Bamberg, 1997, p. 340, second paragraph).

The narrator proceeds to present an example from their lives, of what sometimes happens and how they feel after getting over adversities or beating a personal record. The self-positioning in the paragraph has archetypical characteristics of what a stereotypical life of a depressed person is like, where there are ups and downs: "Depression makes me apathetic and demotivated" and "the feeling I got when I beat a PR and apply that to getting some code debugged or what ever then I am winning". It is not at all atypical for a person suffering from depression to become "apathetic and demotivated", to "just stay in bed". This follows along with the master narratives of depressed people's lives (e.g. Dimidjian et al., 2007, p. 338; Marin, 1990; Lavretsky & Small, 2004; Robinson, 2004), which oppose the master narratives of non-depressed people's lives (see McLean et al., 2018). The self-positioning is therefore very in line with that of the category and social identity of *being depressed*. A dichotomy is presented here, where the protagonist positions themselves as being both on the better side of depression through feeling better and elated by doing well (which could also elude to some type of manic depression or bipolar disorder; see Coryell et al., 1993), having a more positive self-categorisation as that of a person who belongs to the group of people who receive positive results through exercise in their struggles with depression, as well as a dark side of depression by falling to the bottom of what depression is like when it takes control (which could also elude to chronic depression; e.g. Cruwys et al., 2014). This in turn creates a more negative social identification of a person who self-categorises themselves as and has a social identity of a person struggling with depression.

The narrator then follows by describing how mindfulness has helped them, at least in some degree. While the narrator seems to have taken to mindfulness with some reservation: "The flavour of the month with regards to mental health issues", they do claim to at least partake in it for its implied benefits, potential or otherwise. By stating: "I personally use t'ai chi **for this**" (emphasis added), it could be safe to assume that the narrator sees themselves as having and-or achieving mindfulness. Therefore this can be seen as self-positioning themselves as a person whose self-categorisation belongs to what could be described as *mindful people*: A person who has control and presence over oneself, being aware of their (passing) negative states of mind. This could also be seen as adhering to a master narrative of mindfulness helping with depression, which could also explain the narrator's slightly dismissive stance towards mindfulness by calling it the "flavour of the month" (see Williams, 2008, for *mindfulness*). This can also be seen in level 2 positioning, pointing to how the various levels of positioning could in fact be just working in tandem. More similarities between these two levels of positioning can be seen in the last part of the paragraph: "Even lifting weights can be mindful as you are concentrating so fully on what you are doing", where the narrator self-positions as an authority

on the matter. Unlike in level 2 positioning, though, in level 3 positioning it can be deducted that the narrator considers themselves to have enough knowledge on the matter to state it. This eludes to self-categorising oneself as an expert among peers, or at least speaking from a stance of more knowledge. This in turn creates an atmosphere where the narrator's arguments should be respected, at least to the degree that people do not make light of what the narrator has stated here.

6 DISCUSSION

In this last chapter I shall summarise my findings as well as the topics covered throughout this master's thesis. After this I shall discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this thesis as a whole, while simultaneously attempting to answer potential questions the reader may have, as well as ponder certain topics myself. After this is all said and done, my hope is that the reader is left with a satisfying conclusion to this narrative of a thesis, as well as thinks of both the thesis in its entirety as well as the topics presented, critically. While I do not necessarily wish that the reader agrees with my findings or thoughts, it would be enough if it at least stimulates the reader to assess various topics, not out of confusion but curiosity.

6.1 Summary of the results

The aim of this thesis was to research the various ways in which people form, produce or display their social identities through narrative positioning. In my analysis, I found that social identities are indeed present within each respective level of Bamberg's (1997) narrative positioning analysis. A theme that was present in all of my findings was an apparent identification with the "Exercise Out Of Depression" subreddit. For instance the narrators' narratives gave off the impression that the audience would automatically understand the narrators' points of reference, and could relate in some degree. All three analyses found that the protagonists (the narrators themselves) had ups and downs while exercising in order to feel better from depression. While this generalisation does not do justice to the complexity of the issues and battles presented, it is not entirely inaccurate to thematise the narratives accordingly, either. Naturally there were differences as well. Mainly that some attempted to influence the audience directly, while others did not. This attempt to directly influence, or instruct, the audience was the most obvious in the third and final analysis. The narrative worked as a more of a cautionary tale to keep expectations low and not expect miracles to happen from exercise. The message being that combatting depression through exercise requires time and dedication.

So how does social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT) fit into this? As can be recalled, SIT is a person's group membership and the emotional attachments the person has to them (e.g. Postmes et al., 1995, p. 176), as well as which groups the person does not belong to, such as through self-categorisation (e.g. Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 240). Social identities are also present in narratives and are expressed through various identifying remarks, such as through the emphasis of similarities or differences between other people and groups, or by antagonising others (e.g. De Fina, 2013; Scuzzarello, 2015).

Similar ways of asserting group membership can be seen in my analyses as well. For instance in the first analysis the narrator discusses martial arts helping them with their depression, simultaneously requesting responses from others who have similarly experienced help through the practice of martial arts. Within the narrative it can also be seen that the narrator distinguishes between their in- and out-group by emphasising similarities among the in-group by claiming a shared social identity of depressed martial artist, and antagonises the out-group for causing the narrator to be unwelcome through "belittling". The second analysis shows how social identity, that is how its in- and out-group concepts come into play. The narrator/protagonist had had a positive social identity as a college track athlete, which had helped his depressive symptoms due to a frequent exercise schedule. Interestingly the narrator explained how their past identification as a "college track athlete" helped them with their depression, the loss of which only worsened it, effectively placing him in the out-group. Getting that social identity back, being able to categorise himself as an athlete again, empowered him to feel better from his depressive symptoms and reinsert himself into the in-group.

More similarities between the analyses presented here and previous results can be seen in Bamberg's (1997) narrative positioning analysis. As can be recalled, Bamberg's (1997) NPA is divided into three levels. 1. How the characters are positioned in the narrative, 2. How the audience is positioned in relation to the narrator, and 3. How the narrator positions themselves. Level 1 NPA can be seen most similarly to Bamberg's (1997) analysis from the first analysis in this thesis. Bamberg's analysis of "I once was angry" (p. 338) has a similar tone to mine of "constant belittling". In both cases the protagonist has been *inexcusably* wronged and victimised by their supposed in-groups: The sister in Bamberg's analysis, the (ex-) friends in the first analysis example. Level 2 NPA can be seen most similarly to Bamberg's analysis in the third analysis example. Similar positions of authorities and experts are taken by both the girls in Bamberg's text and the narrator in my data. The last analysis had particularly similar features to Bamberg's (1997) own analyses of level 3 positioning as well. More-so due to how thematically similar they were since both analyses concluded that the narrator seem to consider themselves an authority on the matter of their personal health. Although this similarity could of course be argued that I was merely influenced by Bamberg's (1997) analysis due to using the method of analysis in question.

6.2 Limitations of the study

The limitations of this research shall be discussed here. The most noticeable limitation is especially in regards to how accurately my analyses capture the narrators' actual situation, intention, and social identity. I have previously discussed how a similar situation to De Fina's (2013) article, where she

had collected data from the people being analysed beforehand through different projects, would have been ideal. Unfortunately I do not have access to such data nor a way of getting it in the first place. This is why I attempt to stay within the narrative's world, so to speak, in my analyses, instead of attempting to make generalisations of the narrators' lives beyond what is stated. Naturally in some places I had to make conclusions as to what a certain part of the narrative could mean, but I did make it clear that it would be a conclusion or deduction made according to the presented narrative. Had I material consisting of background information on the narrators (although the point of internet anonymity would surely be missing at that point), I feel that I could make more accurate conclusions.

A bit of a problematic case could be that of the master narrative. I have no way of knowing whether or not the narrators have heard of the master narratives I bring forth in my analyses, something that De Fina (2013) could easily conclude based on her vast data. But it would be foolish of me not to connect the dots between the similarities of the overarching themes and concepts presented in the studied narratives with those of what master narratives of depression are. While I cannot definitively state that a narrator has heard *"X master narrative of depression"* (paraphrasing myself), I can state that *"X is similar to Y master narrative"*. But then there is the argument of which one is the master narrative; giving a concise response to it is impossible without diving into it in much more detail. That would have to be discussed and researched in another research paper. Regardless, I am aware that I cannot definitively define whether or not the master narratives I deducted are the actual master narratives of the topic. Although, as stated, the proverbial dots are there to connect.

Naturally the reliability of the results presented in this thesis can surely be questioned. Indeed, how do I ensure my conclusions and results are reliable? Considering that a qualitative study such as the one presented here, does not have a so-called hard science to rely on, such as maths for quantitative studies, it could be easy to brush off as just an interpretation. What should be pointed out then is that there is a heavy reliance on previous studies throughout this research paper, studies which all come from peer-reviewed publications, and at the same time an in-depth look at narratives such as the ones presented in this master's thesis, could not be done with quantitative measures. This study is focused on the details and the person, not an attempt at quantifying personal stories. While true, the results would still be interpretations in the literal sense, they are based on past scientific research conducted by minds far greater than mine. Furthermore, any discussion of the logic behind the results in the research paper, would unfortunately not be relevant to this field of research. Naturally anyone can disagree and produce different results, but those would fall more in line with perspective than an inherent issue with the arguments presented here. Going into much more detail than that would fall

more in line with logical theory, but that would be more of a philosophical debate, moving the conversation away from strictly social psychological and psychological contexts.

Regardless of the limitations, hopefully this master's thesis gives some insight to the utilisation of SIT and NPA in analysing the different factors that play into exercising out of depression. I have shown that not only are social identity, and topics related to depression, present in narrative positioning, but also that the various ways in which social identity with a healing-focused Internet community have allowed people suffering from depression to go on the road to recovery. From this it would be safe to argue that, indeed, having a healthy social identity could alleviate depressive symptoms, much like how Cruwys et al. (2015) argued. It could also be argued that exercise has had positive results in some people who suffer from depression, as per Kessler et al. (1999). And finally, narratives can portray both the social identities of the narrators (e.g. De Fina, 2013) and struggles people have with depression (e.g. Rodriguez, Holleran, & Mehl, 2010).

6.3 Conclusion

With this final segment I intend to bring up topics of discussion for what this research paper could mean in a larger picture. First I wish to discuss its methods' utility in other types of research. Narratives seem to be particularly telling of a person's *self*. Not only in that the narratives could be *stories* about the narrator, but also how the narrator interprets the world around them. Raita-aho and Sorjanen (2017, pp. 15–26, 146–151) have a revealing collection of narratives which show off this interpretation quite clearly. The collection has little to do with depression, but it does exemplify the depth of narratives and their potential for analysis. The three narratives presented in this thesis hopefully portray this potential as well, which leads me to speculate if the method presented in this thesis could be used to discern other types of identities and identifications on the Internet? De Fina's (2013) analysis already worked as a *map* for this thesis on how to incorporate NPA with SIT, although it did not study Internet forums or depression, but it did produce other results, such as on ethnic (social) identity. This, in my opinion, shows that the combination of NPA and SIT is flexible. What I am left to wonder is how well it would work in other types of Internet environments. After all the Internet is accessible, and one consequence of that accessibility is that all types of groups have a way of socialising, hateful or otherwise (e.g. Oksanen et al., 2014). Maybe narratives could provide insight as to why some people identify or relate to more negatively oriented groups (e.g. Gemignani & Hernandez-Albujar, 2015) and through that better understanding find a way to redirect *hatred*? I can definitely see narratives as having the potential to explain some of the factors related to identification (with certain social groups). It would be interesting to see if that potential is realised.

Naturally this combination might draw the methodology back into the epistemology debate covered before in this thesis (see Jost & Kruglanski, 2002). Ultimately the divide between constructionism and experimentalism seems quite unnecessary in this case (e.g. Archakis & Tzanne, 2005), especially when it comes to limiting research methods and theoretical approaches merely for this type of *gatekeeping*, at least when it comes to a master's thesis. Without a doubt these differences could be argued and have a place in social psychological discourse, but what I am left to wonder is how exactly would the results and conclusions from the analyses differ? I do understand that the *mechanisms* would surely be different, but at the end of the day would those analyses give any significantly different viewpoints for the ones affected by whatever ails them, or to the reader? For instance what I find is that self-categorisation (SCT) and self-positioning (Bamberg Level 3) seem to have a lot in common in the way they work and are expressed. Or at the very least are quite easy to study as functioning in similar ways. While this might not be completely relevant to social psychological research, for me personally, it would be interesting to see a brain scan when a person is doing both. At least this way there would be some other data to go by than two minds arguing with each other. This undertaking is folly for a master's thesis, but at a doctoral level I could imagine this producing some interesting results.

With that said, I hope that I do enough justice to the narratives and the narrators' struggles, shedding some light on how an anonymous Internet environment could help with mental health struggles. Indeed it is McKenna and Bargh (1998) who argue that the participants of their study felt more empowered addressing their stigmatised features due to a positive group belonging in an anonymous Internet group. So maybe it is the fact that they *are anonymous in the first place*, which helps them achieve that positive identification in face-to-face settings? This could equally apply to people suffering from depression, and were they recognisable via background information, maybe they could not share such personal tales of woes and sorrow? After all, depression can be a stigmatising feature within social contexts (e.g. Cruwys et al., 2014, p. 219).

It could also be argued that the atmosphere and theme of the subreddit (EOOD) suggests a certain type of narrative that should be portrayed. What if it limits people from posting stories of failure? This is a background factor that could be considered in wider undertakings that study Reddit material. After all, the karma system alone could create a type of social bubble which prevents people from posting anything that would go against the conduct and echo chambers within a subreddit (Richterich, 2014). What is meant by social bubble is a type of feedback loop that allows a person to stay in a social environment that *feeds* the type of information *back* to the person that they want to hear,

therefore creating an environment which spreads biased and polarised opinions, potentially mis-construing how popular or correct that information or opinion truly is (Keipi et al., 2017, pp. 18, 115).

However, if we go back to the codes of conduct for the EOOD subreddit, it can be seen that there is nothing preventing people from talking about their failures. In fact, within the material I received, there were numerous instances of such failures. But they were more about asking for advice than presenting a narrative of a series of events (hence why those were not included, that and this would become mind-numbingly long to read). Regardless, I feel that Reddit echo chambers should be a cause of consideration for anyone attempting to go forth with this undertaking, but at the same time it is not an issue for the specific approach I have in this thesis, if not mostly due to my localised point of view on the narrative itself.

As for this master's thesis, it utilises an approach which combines narrative positioning with the theory of social identity. It is my view that these work in conjunction quite well, having similar mechanisms to one another. At certain points, such as in the narrators' self-positioning, it was difficult to make a distinction between narrative positioning and, for instance, self-categorisation. The identities and identifiers presented could have just as easily been defined as positioning or categorisation. While the intent is not to state that the approaches (NPA and SIT respectively) are the same, this is an argument for using the two in conjunction, as this combination can provide a pleasing synergy, as well as access to the concepts in both approaches without either limiting the other. And by adding depression into the combination, there might be potential here to give mental health care yet another way to tackle depression. Leave no stone unturned after all.

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