

Why Do People Share Online? Online Disinhibition Effect in the Context of the Virtual Community of Reddit

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Abstract

For the past two decades, the growth of Internet has been truly exponential. Although there is nothing deterministic about the effects of this technological revolution, it is evident that the Internet is changing our behavior in fundamental ways.

One recent expression of the Internet culture is the website **reddit.com**, which describes itself as “*the front page of Internet*”. In their personal stories the users of Reddit share everything from their financial problems to their illegal venture. And to every touching story about struggling with depression there is a startlingly rude joke about the said depression.

What motivates people to share their stories in Reddit even though not necessarily a single user will remember their username?

One of the biggest influencers on how we behave online is *the online disinhibition effect*. To understand the site and its communications in a fundamental way, I decided to study the online disinhibition effect in the virtual community of Reddit through netnography. For a period of one year, I participated in the community, aiming to document the experiences of others and myself on the site.

According to my research the characteristics typical to Reddit communications: anonymity, lack of cues, and text-basedness affect change the way we communicate on the site, compared to how we communicate face-to-face. When communicating on the site, redditors are able to dissociate themselves from their daily life and identity and assume instead communications' culture, values and morals associated with the virtual community of Reddit. Thus, online disinhibition effect in Reddit means not abandoning all norms but conforming to new ones.

All of this is meaningful for the community members because disinhibited behavior gives redditors feelings of *empowerment* or perceived capabilities in coping with various challenges and overcoming obstacles. Online disinhibition can create empowering experiences through venting, finding similar others, and heightened feelings of self-efficacy as well as receiving emotional support. Thus, people behave disinhibitedly online to feel more powerful and capable.

My research contributes to the field of consumer research, although I borrow concepts and ideas vastly from the fields of social psychology and communications studies. Through understanding the phenomena of online disinhibition better, I hope to contribute to the discourse on virtual communities and brand communities by shedding light on how we as consumers are shaped by our presence and actions online.

Keywords Online Disinhibition Effect, Netnography, Virtual Communities, Consumer Culture, Identity, Empowerment, Computers as mediators of Communication

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1. Introduction

"You're connecting with tens of thousands of people in a way which has never been seen before. We're able to experience so much perspective from so many times, places and people through Reddit.

It's new - and it's an interface which leaves the physical behind. It's not bad, it's just different. We (assuming we're alike in age) are a generation that bridges a gap between the 'old ways' of the older generation, and the incredible, fast-moving, always changing frontier of human experience that increasing technology is providing...."

/u/Leovinus_Jones, 09.04.2014

1.1. Research Phenomena

For the past two decades, the growth of Internet has been truly exponential (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Although there is nothing deterministic about the effects of this technological revolution, it is evident that the Internet is changing our behavior in fundamental ways (Belk, 2013).

One recent expression of the Internet culture is the website **reddit.com**, which describes itself as "*the front page of Internet*". Reddit is an online community and entertainment site where registered users share content in form of links, image macros and text. Other registered users can then vote this comment up or down to determine its place on the website. Content can also be commented and every comment can also be "upvoted" or "downvoted."

On September 6th of 2015 Reddit had over two hundred million unique visitors from over two hundred different countries viewing a over five billion pages in a duration of a month (<http://www.reddit.com/about/>, retrieved 6.09.2015). Reddit caters to an unbelievably wide audience with equally wide areas of interest. It has everything from Photoshop battles to political debate to scientific discussion and relationship problems. The huge pool of users and topics combined with an efficient vote algorithms makes Reddit uniquely fast paced and diverse site for viewing and spreading content.

I have been an avid Reddit user or, as we like to call ourselves, a redditor for the past six years. Reddit offers me an array of interesting content from news to advice and to memes. However what makes me come back to Reddit over and over again, rather than the latest viral success or interesting technological advantages, is the stories, anecdotes and jokes told everyday by my fellow redditors.

Compared to the interactions I have in my daily life, the interactions on Reddit are more funny, honest, brutal and intimate. In their personal stories the users of Reddit share everything from their finan-

cial problems to their illegal ventures a to their struggles with depression. And to every touching story about struggling with depression there is a startlingly rude joke about the said depression. For every real life cancer survivor story there is a fake cancer survivor story. For every clever joke there is someone who steals it.

What motivates people to share their stories in Reddit even though not necessarily a single user will remember their username? What makes you make up fake stories about cancer, when all you gain is some Internet attention?

One of the biggest influencers on how we behave online is *the online disinhibition effect* (Suler, 2004) meaning the way we act more disinhibitedly online - in good and in bad.

I felt inclined to study the online disinhibition effect in the context of the virtual community of Reddit because I felt it was a good point-of-view to describe the unique characteristics that participating in Reddit offers. I would argue that the online disinhibition effect is one of the core elements that define modern virtual communities and their culture. It is what you gain when you communicate with virtual strangers instead of your friends and family. It is intimacy, deception, kindness and support in unlikely places.

As virtual community research pioneer and an avid virtual community member Howard Rheingold (1993) puts it:

“the medium will, by its nature . . . be a place where people often end up revealing themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms”

1.2. Research Objectives

My research objective is to understand what makes the members of the virtual community of Reddit act more disinhibited in the community than they would in real life situations. In my thesis I will especially concentrate on the *psychological implications* of the online disinhibition effect. In other words, I will concentrate on:

1. Understanding what kind of *contextual factors* related to the virtual community of Reddit –or in a larger scale communicating via the Internet– contribute into making it a prolific ground for disinhibited behavior.
2. Understanding what *cognitive implications* these contextual factors have for the individual that make him express disinhibition.
3. Understanding what kind of inner motivations are behind acting disinhibited online. In other

words, what of real on expected *cognitive implications* does the disinhibited behavior have for the person displaying it.

In my research, I aim to gain insight on what kind of cognitive context does the virtual community of Reddit create for its' users and how does it affect their way of communicating, identity and mental state. Through these insights, we can begin to understand what does it mean for an individual to participate in virtual communities. This is something I personally believe will affect our lives, morals and selves more and more in the upcoming years.

The age of Internet has only arrived and it will change not only the way we act (Belk, 2013) but also how we think (Turkle, 1995) and see the world (Granic & Lamey, 2000).

1.3. Research Questions

My research problem would be defined as:

How does the online disinhibition effect manifest itself in the context of the virtual community of Reddit in terms of the individual's cognitive state?

It can be divided to three sub questions:

1. *What are the contextual factors that contribute to the increased disinhibition in the context of the virtual community of Reddit?*
2. *How do these contextual factors mold individual cognitions of the individual Redditor?*
3. *What are the inner motivations behind acting disinhibited in Reddit? (As in what are the expected cognitive changes the redditors are after when engaging in disinhibited behavior)*

1.4. Positioning of Research

This study heavily relies on the concept of *online disinhibition* first coined by Suler (2004). Drawing from Suler (2004) can be defined as:

More intense or frequent self-disclosure or acting up in the context of online environment compared to real life situations.

To understand the online disinhibition, a relatively little studied and new subject, I have drawn from multiple different research discourses including:

- Computers as mediators of communication
- Psychological perspectives on the Internet usage
- Virtual communities as communities
- Identity and self on the age of Internet

In the studies on computer-mediated-communications or CMC I focus on understanding the *differences between face-to-face communications and CMC*. These ideas form the framework of the contextual differences in communicating over the Internet rather than FtF that might be contributing to the online disinhibition effect. From there, I will move on to the studies conducted on the online disinhibition itself as well as the hyperpersonal perspective - a term coined by Walther (1996), also used to describe disinhibited behavior online.

I will also offer some psychological theories and explanations used to explain online disinhibition effect – mainly in the form of well-known social psychology concepts of deindividuation effect (Zimbardo, 1970) and the SIDE model (Reicher, 1982) and various studies made on the psychological effects of Internet usage (Suler 2004; Granic & Lamey, 2000; McKenna & Bargh, 2000)

Through a few studies conducted on how the Internet might change our world view and way of thinking (Turkle, 1995; Granic & Lamey, 2000) I aim to gain an understanding on the culture, morals and values Internet encourages in communities and individuals.

I will also briefly study virtual communities as communities to offer you an understanding of the motivations to participate in virtual communities, the amount in which these communities share values, understanding or collective consciousness as well as how virtual communities shape the way we communicate.

Lastly, I will look at identity, self and empowerment on the age of Internet to offer an overview on what it means to our identity and mental state to participate in virtual communities - particularly by engaging in disinhibited or confessional behavior.

Through these fragmented discourses I will aim to offer you an holistic, psychological understanding on how the individual's cognitions are affected by the context of the virtual community leading to online disinhibition which then leads to changes in a person's mental state.

My research contributes to the field of consumer research, although I borrow concepts and ideas vastly from the fields of social psychology and communications studies.

I aim to understand how our disinhibited communications are enabled by concrete changes in our social context and through that in our cognition. Further, I aim to understand what are the inner motivations behind these disinhibited communications and how do these communications actually alter

our mental state. Through understanding the phenomena of online disinhibition better, I hope to contribute to the discourse on virtual communities and brand communities by shedding light on how we as consumers are shaped by our presence and actions online. In terms of research methods the study leans on the netnography as a research method as defined and defined by Kozinets (1998).

There have been no previous vast studies on online disinhibition in the context of virtual communities. My study aims to fill this gap in research.

1.5. Outline of the Study

In my literature review I will look at five main topics 1) computers as mediators of communications 2) the Internet and changing modes of thinking 3) understanding virtual communities 4) discourse on online disinhibition effect and 5) identity on the age of Internet & empowerment.

The first three topics paint the overall picture of the context of the online disinhibition effect in Reddit, casting light to the discourses related to: 1) how computers affect to what we express outside, 2) How computers and the Internet affects what we perceive inside, 3) how virtual communities mold our cognitions.

Next, I will look the core of this study: the discourse on online disinhibition effect itself. Through a thorough overview on the subject we can relate these findings to the context and thus create a preliminary framework for finding answers for the first two research questions: *What are the contextual factors that contribute to the increased disinhibition in the context of the virtual community of Reddit? How do these contextual factors mold individual cognitions of the individual Redditor?*

Lastly, I will offer an outlook on the concepts of identity on the age of Internet and empowerment. These discourses are related to my third research question: *What are the inner motivations behind acting disinhibited in Reddit?* Through the concepts of empowerment, identity and self I aim to explain how the disinhibited behavior molds our mental state.

After my literary view, I will move on to explain my research methodology, including my epistemology, ontology as well as my methods of data collection and analysis. As you will learn, my research is based on constructivistic paradigm and netnographic research, and it aims to explore the hows and whys of the online disinhibition effect in Reddit through creating a preliminary conceptual model of it.

After that, I will move on to my research. Firstly, to increase your understanding on the context I will offer you a quick look on Reddit as virtual community or user-interface in general.

To further illustrate the subject and its' I will move on to characterize and categorizing the displays of online disinhibition effect on the site as well as exploring the motivations behind participating to on-line disinhibition effect.

After this, I will explain my interpretation of the online disinhibition mechanism in Reddit by exploring and explaining the cognitive context I believe contributes to the online disinhibition. These findings offer an answer two first two of my research questions: *What are the contextual factors that contribute to the increased disinhibition in the context of the virtual community of Reddit? How do these contextual factors mold individual cognitions of the individual Redditor?*

Next, I will explore the key motivations connected to our identity and self behind online disinhibition. In other words, how we believe engaging in online disinhibition will positively affect us. Furthermore, I will also study how our cognitions might actually be changed after engaging in disinhibitive behavior online. This section answers my last research question: *What are the inner motivations behind acting disinhibited in Reddit? (As in what are the expected cognitive changes the redditors are after when engaging in disinhibited behavior)*

Then I will move on to discussion, where I will aim to tie my research into other discourses on the subject, reflecting on where my findings differ and unite with what others have discovered about online disinhibition, the values and ethics of the Age of Internet in general, communality in virtual communities as well as empowerment through virtual communities. I will also make some educated guesses and further reflection on my research findings.

To conclude, I will present a summary. In the summary I will look at my research limitation, theoretical implications as well as what I think should be studied next.

2. Computers as Mediators of Communication

2.1. Overview

To understand the online disinhibition effect we need to understand how computer-mediated communications (CMC) differ from other forms of communication. In this chapter I will aim to give an overview of how current research sees computers as mediators of communication and what are **main** differences between CMC and other forms of communication. Through understand computer-mediated communications we can also understand the context of communication in Reddit.

Characterizing CMC can be hard. Although the differences between CMC and FtF have been widely studied, no well-established terminology or unified theory exists on how should we separate FtF communication from CMC. In this thesis we will start studying at CMC by looking at its' most fundamental functions.

Firstly, in CMC the communicators are *connected to each other through a device*. This, inevitably removes some of the direct feedback and communication methods of FtF: depending on the CMC media, the communicators might not see each other, hear each other or be able to communicate timely. All and all, the computer mediation inevitably makes CMC an indirect form of communication: there is always a machine between the communicator and the respondent. (Postmes et al., 1998)

Secondly, in the context of this thesis, we can state that CMC is *text-based*. While other communication methods exist and are widely used, text is still the single most important method of communication on the Internet (Postmes et al. 1998). This is a natural outcome as text is also the language of computers and Internet: we direct and navigate the computers by text and computers actually started out with completely text-based interfaces. Text is something that is easy to put on the Internet, easy to find and easy to leave for others to find.

In Henderson & Gilding's (2004) research on trust in online communications one of their interviewees, called Hayley, describes the text-basedness of CMC in a following way:

*"Text is the only medium you have online, and typing to each other, and revealing information about yourself, is about the only way you can get close to someone. In real life, you can just hang out with the person, and not say a word. Spending time together, and sharing experiences in real life brings you closer. **Online, you share words.**"*

From the standpoint of these two principles: connectivity through a device and text-basedness and from various different articles I have drawn information to form the three key differences between

CMC and FtF. (Donath, 1998; Postmes et al., 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Suler, 2004; Walther, 2007):

- Anonymity
- Asynchronicity
- Lacking Cues

These concepts are something I will constantly refer back to as they are the basis off all CMC. Let's look at each of these concepts closer.

2.2. Anonymity

It is quite easy to function completely anonymously on the Internet. One much used humorous example of this phenomena is the illustration famous New York times comic has told us: "*On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog*" (Steiner, 1993).



Drawing from Suler (2004) and Labidot-Lefler & Barak (2012) we can define two dimensions of anonymity: **invisibility** and **unidentifiability**.

Invisibility means that one can use the Internet to surf sites and read about interest *without no one knowing*. When you're alone at home staring at your screen there is no judgment of strangers. With tools like incognito mode, or even Tor networks - a true anonymity can be achieved, with no trace of your actions or identity in real life is left.

Unidentifiability is also linked to anonymous actions online. When you communicate with people on the Internet, they *can't easily determine who you are in real life*, esernames, avatars or emails might be visible, but they can and often are completely dissected from your RL (real life) personality (Suler,

2004).

It is also important to note that in the virtual world, many degrees of identification are possible. Most users don't actually engage in full anonymity, but rather use *pseudonyms* such as usernames or avatars. While a pseudonym might be completely disconnected from person's real life identity, they might have their own reputation and personality in the virtual world.

2.3. Asynchrony

Most forms of CMC, like emails, message boards and -to some extent- chat rooms, are asynchronous. Asynchrony means that the communication doesn't happen in real time (Suler, 2004; Walther, 1996). This has two meaningful effects. The communicator:

1. doesn't have to cope with other people's reactions immediately (or sometimes at all)
2. can take the time they need to formulate their response, polishing and phrasing it to perfection (Suler, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

In other words: CMC is **editable** and **not sensitive to time**: no quick responses are needed and messages can be changed and composed flexibly (Walther 2007).

What effects does asynchrony have? Some researchers argue that as opposed to real life, a person can *more easily manage* the expression they want to give out of themselves (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Asynchrony gives people time to edit and compose their messages in peace.

2.4. Lacking Cues

The final difference between communication online and IRL is the lack of visual and audio cues. On the Internet you often do not know how your conversation partner looks like or sounds like. This also leads to little knowledge on what kind of shades of voice they use and what kind of expressions they make (Suler 2004). Since not all information that exists in IRL communications is readily available, we will might project our own, invented images on how a person sounds or looks like (Suler 2004).

This is supported by Ellison et al.'s (2006) study on self presentation in online dating. The study suggest that subtle cues, like right spelling are important in self-presentation. One of their interviewees describes why they look for well-written dating profiles in a following way:

“If I am getting email from someone that obviously can’t spell or put a full sentence together, I’m thinking what other parts of his life suffer from the same lack of attentiveness?”

Similarly, the interviewees considered throughly how their own profile might be interpreted:

“I really analyzed the way I was going to present myself. I’m not one of these [people who write] all cutesy type things, but I wanted to be cute enough, smart enough, funny enough, and not sexual at all, because I didn’t want to invite someone who thought I was going to go to bed with them [as soon as] I shook their hand. (PaliToWW, Los Angeles Female)”

Similarly, Donath’s (1998) study on Usenet group’s found that important markers of identity in the context of Usenet (a bulletinboard system’s predecessor form 1980s) are:

- The persons username or email pseudonym (anonymous posting is often frowned upon).
- What the person chooses to convey about him/herself through the text (impressions given).
- What can be read between the lines, from the person’s choices of words (impressions given off).

Thus, in the context of Usenet, language is most important part of self-presentation and identity. Language can be used to recognize users and to identify their socio-economical status or other attributes.

2.5. Conclusions

The communication via computers is different than in real life. We can talk to whoever we want, despite of geographical location. We can choose the time of communication and we can choose and create who we want to be. We have time to reflect on what the other person has said and how do we want to form our response to it. (Belk, 2013; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Suler, 2004)

On the other hand, we have to communicate with others without the help of all the cues available to us in face-to-face communications: we can’t see facial expressions, verify identities or hear the nuances of speech. (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Suler, 2004).

Language is still the single most important cue on how who you are on the Net:

“Online, you share words.” (Henderson & Gilding, 2004)

As we will learn later on, the unique characteristics of CMC are shaping our identities, cognitive processes and social actions in various ways. (Donath, 1998; Postmes et al., 1998; McKenna&Bargh, 2000; Suler, 2004; Walther, 2007; Belk, 2013)

3. The Internet and Changing Modes of Thinking

3.1. Overview

In addition to understanding the basic differences between CMC and FtF I think it also beneficial for us to understand how the Internet changes and guides us to think, thus molding our cognitive processes. As we will learn later on one of the key elements in online disinhibition in the context of Reddit is how it shapes our morals, values and world view.

To truly understand the Net, it is beneficial to know why and how the Internet was invented. Thus, let's start with a brief history overview. Then, building heavily on the work of Granic & Lamey (2000), I will offer three perspectives on how the Internet might shape our world view, personal belief and values. First, I will look at the perspectivistic world view, as introduced by Turkle (1995) and Granic & Lamey (2000). Then, I will look at critical thinking skills and development of efficacy beliefs as introduced by Granic & Lamey (2000).

3.2. A Brief History of the Net

The Internet was first invented in United States in the early 1960s as a military solution on how US authorities could communicate with each other when facing a nuclear attack (Granic & Lamey, 2000). Since nuclear attack could easily destroy any centrally controlled communication systems another solution was proposed: the RAND corporation developed a new form of *de-centralized network communication with intertwined redundant connections* (Granic & Lamey, 2000). It had no central control and every node connected to the network had equal authority to pass and receive messages (Granic & Lamey, 2000)

Rather quickly, the Internet garnered other usages in addition to the intended military purposes: scientists around US were eager to access one another's computer facilities over long distances (Granic & Lamey, 2000). After the email function was introduced in 1972, the researchers started to use the net far more for sending messages to each other than for sharing computer tasks (Leiner et al. 2009).

The Internet continues to grow driven by the ever expanding amounts of information, entertainment and social networking. During the late 1990s it was estimated that traffic on the Internet grew by 100 percent each year (Coffman & Odlyzko, 1998).

The Internet consists of cables, phone lines, satellites and fiber optics. But most of all it consists of people and their connections (Granic & Lamey, 2000). As we learned earlier, although it was never intended, Internet has always been a *highly social tool* and it has from the very start had an important

role in *making text-based communications possible over long distances* (Granic & Lamey, 2000).

In addition, unlike earlier methods of communication, computers were not designed just *one specific communication in mind*. Phones are meant for transmitting sound, television for transmitting picture and sound. Computers on the other hand are capable of video chatting, mass posting, interacting through video games and various other communication forms. (Postmes et al., 1998).

This highly social, equal network has also changed the way we think and how we behave (Granic & Lamey, 2000, Belk, 2013).

Granic & Lamey (2000) offer an interesting outlook on the *psychological implications of everyday Internet usage might have on an individual*. For this thesis, the most relevant ideas Granic & Lamey (2000) offer us are: perspectivistic world view, emphasis critical thinking skills and development of efficacy beliefs.

3.3. Perspectivistic World View

According to Turkle (1995) the Internet is making postmodern perspectivism central to our everyday life. What does this mean?

It can be argued that before Internet, we lived largely in a world of paper. Information was stable and tightly locked in the confines of paper. When something was published, it couldn't be edited again and a book could be considered a trustworthy source of reference-checked information. This could leave us prone to the idea that there exists one objective truth. (Granic & Lamey, 2000)

As opposed to the authoritarian rules and tight hierarchies of our previous world on paper, Internet is ever shifting subjective process (Granic & Lamey, 2000). On the Internet, we are constantly exposed to multitude of opinions, ever updating information, changing rules and emerging communities. Using a search engine will provide a multitude of results, opinions and sites, whereas a dictionary will only provide one result.

In this kind of environment one is more likely to lean towards the idea that there is not just one truth, but rather that *truth is subjective, and there is multiple truths depending on one's perspective* (Gergen, 1993). Thus, our world view is shifting towards perspectivism.

3.4. Critical Thinking Skills

However, Granic & Lamey (2000) underline that perspectivism doesn't mean that one gives every bit of information equal value. In the world of paper one can generally trust that what one reads is true. However on the Net anyone can post information without any kind of a filtering or check-ups.

Granic & Lamey theoreticize that using the Net for acquiring information can foster critical thinking skills. When all information is subject to doubt, one must be able to judge it's accuracy by oneself (Granic & Lamey, 2000). Thus, while in the world of paper we lived in the world of trust, in the world of the Internet we live in the world of doubt.

3.5. Development of Efficacy Beliefs

For many people Internet may represent their first experience in acting outside hierarchy and authority. As discussed before unlike most conventional modern world systems, like education, family or work, the Internet has no authority and hierarchy takes many different meanings (Granic & Lamey, 2000).

This decentralized systems offers for many individuals a change to promote their ideas and agendas - to organize and find their niches. This may lead to life-changing experiences, as well as to the development of personal belief about efficacy and control in general (Granic & Lamey, 2000). In other words: In the world of future people might not be as ready as before to accept authority or given norms or rules without questioning them. In the absence of authority figures, people are also less afraid of punishment and more free to say what they really think (Suler, 2004).

3.6. Conclusions

Although it was never intended, Internet has always been *a highly social tool* and since its' invention it has worked as a connector and people who otherwise couldn't be connected - mainly because of geographic distance (Granic & Lamey, 2000). In addition, unlike earlier methods of communication, computers were not designed just one specific communication in mind - thus unlike for example the telephone, the Internet makes a *multitude of communication methods available*.

In conclusion, the Net's unique properties may give a rise to chances in contemporary modes of thought, that occurred first with the printed word (Granic & Lamey, 2000). Although Granic & Lamey's (2000) work represents only a preliminary attempt on defining the psychological impacts the Net might have, one can already see some of these changes taking place. For example the recent criticism on bureaucracy in Finland can be seen as people questioning authority and critically analyzing the information they receive.

4. Understanding Virtual Communities

4.1. Overview

In this last part related to understanding the context of online disinhibition effect in Reddit, I will look at the context of virtual communities.

First, I will offer an outlook on how the discourse on virtual communities begun. Next, I will look at virtual communities as communities: as to better understand how the way we perceive the concept community might shape our cognitions. Next, I will look at the characteristics of virtual communities and outline the most important differences and similarities between virtual communities and what we traditionally understand as a community. Lastly, I will look at some studies made on cognitions and cognitive processes in virtual communities, especially related to communication and participation in them.

Through these three themes I will hope to shed some light on how virtual communities might affect how we think and act and what might motivate us to participate and communicate in these communities.

4.2. The Discourse on Virtual Communities

The term "community" originally referred mainly to geographical or local communities tied to a specific location (Wellman 1988; Wellman & Gulia, 1997). However, in the late 1980's Barry Wellman (1988) introduced the concept of *social network communities*. Wellman's (1988) new and revolutionizing idea was that with the help of cars, planes and telephones, communities could exist in social networks not tied to specific tight group of people in one place. This conceptual revolution shifted the discussion of geographical community to social network community (Wellman, 1993; Wellman & Gulia, 1997).

In tandem with the introduction of social networks, the term *virtual community* was introduced by the Internet community pioneer Howard Rheingold (1993) in his book "the Virtual Community." The book discusses especially Rheingold's adventures on The WELL, one of the oldest Internet forums with various range of subjects (Rheingold, 1993). The book also covers other early virtual communities like Usenet, MUDs and their derives MUSHes and MOOs, IRC, chat rooms and so called electronic mailing lists, which have since been important to the research on virtual communities.

Whereas the discussion on computer-mediated communications started out with the idea that CMC was a limited and inferior form of communication (Daft & Lengel 1984: 201, Dubrovsky, Kiesler &

Sethna 1991: 119), Rheingold's (1993) introduction of virtual communities already discussed the various benefits of these communities, probably because Rheingold himself was deeply affected by his membership of the WELL.

In his essay "*A slice of my life in virtual communities*" (1996) Rheingold describes his life in the WELL with following words:

"Since the summer of 1985, I've spent an average of two hours a day, seven days a week, often when I travel, plugged into the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) via a computer and a telephone line, exchanging information and playing with attention, becoming entangled In Real Life, with a growing network of similarly wired-in strangers I met in cyberspace. I remember the first time I walked into a room full of people (IRL) whose faces were completely unknown to me, but who knew many intimate details of my history, and whose own stories I knew very well. I had contended with these people, shot the breeze around the electronic water cooler, shared alliances and formed bonds, fallen off my chair laughing with them, become livid with anger at these people, but I had not before seen their faces."

Another term used often in discourse of CMC and virtual communities is *computer supported social networks* (CSSN) a term coined by Wellman et al. (1996). This term is used to describe the networks that create the basis for virtual communities and other social interactions on the web. Even Rheingold (in revised version of virtual communities 1993) himself stated that he might have named his book "*online social networks*" had he known Wellman's work earlier.

In this thesis we will concentrate on the concept virtual communities as they are primarily thought as connecting *people who are otherwise strangers to each other*. Computer supported social networks also refers to the capability of the Net to connect for example work partners, friends and family in new ways (e.g. Wellman et al., 1996; Rheingold, 1996).

While the Internet became exponentially more common and virtual communities and computer supported social networks grew in quantity, complexity and number of participants, the discourse on virtual communities shifted from debating the concept of community to exploring how and why people participate in these communities and how to make them participate even more (e.g. Bagozzi & Dolagia, 2002; Butler et al., 2007; Hsu et al., 2007).

In the discourse on virtual communities, special interest has always been paid to commercial aspects of virtual communities. For example the turn of the 21st century introduced the concepts of consumption communities and brand communities (Kozinets, 1999; Muniz & O'Guinn (2001). In addition, a lot of the virtual community research has been dedicated to work-related virtual communities (e.g. Finholt et al., 1993; Constant et al. 1996; Ardichvili et. al, 2003;). However, in this thesis we will focus on the non-commercial virtual communities, as one of Reddit's basic principles is being

noncommercial.

4.3. Virtual Communities as Communities

When we look at the born of the Internet as well as its' innermost nature as a *self-organizing, social network* (Granic & Lamey, 2000; Leiner et al., 2009): a place that connects people from everywhere, the born of Internet-based communities is a natural phenomena. As Rheingold (1996) describes:

"Virtual communities emerged from a surprising intersection of humanity and technology. When the ubiquity of the world telecommunications network is combined with the information-structuring and storing capabilities of computers, a new communication medium becomes possible..."

Although most of the discourse on virtual communities has been positive, there are also always critics were worrying that life on the Net can never be as meaningful or complete as real life, because it is lacking of personal contact (Wellman & Gulia, 1997).

However, we must understand that the discourse on communities and communality in general has always been shadowed by romanticism and the fear of new technology (Komito, 1998; Wellman & Gulia, 1997). Komito (1998) explains that often this criticism stems from romanticizing the concept of "community" and reminds us that even these idealized rural communities rivalry, alienation and daily breaking of rules exist (Cohen, 1985; Komito, 1998). According to Komito (1998) the contrast between ideal rural communities and alienation and loneliness of modern world is without much scientific proof: no ethnographic research has found the 'ideal rural community.'

Instead of comparing the rural and modern, a more interesting point of view can be found by understanding that community is *socially constructed concept* that means different things to different people and societies. Community can be equated with: a moral commitment to the community's purpose, shared norms or values of individuals or a shared geographic location (Komito, 1998). According to Komito (1998) a lot of the debate and confusion of the discussion on virtual communities stems when these different concepts are used interchangeably: writers might write about moral communities while deriving metaphors like town hall or public market from the geographical communities.

Komito (1998) suggests that it could be beneficial to see virtual communities as *foraging societies*. Foraging societies are not based on mutual living place, but foraging societies are fluid communities traveling from place to place, people find immediate return on their labor and there is often little sense of collective identity. Membership is voluntary and temporary and the communities are typically egalitarian, meaning that there is no hierarchy or formal roles (Komito, 1998). The correspondences between virtual communities and foraging societies are obvious: the Net also embraces equality, not hierarchy and temporary rather than permanent.

Perhaps Komito (2011) was right to state:

”Is community an extended network that individuals can call on for help, complex weave of overlapping and intertwined networks or is it a sense of common identification and collective solidarity? To avoid rehash of such debates, it is more productive to focus on interactions than generic labels for those interactions”

4.4. Characteristics of Virtual Communities

What are the most prominent features of virtual communities in terms of how they differ from e.g. RL communities? As CMC virtual communities too are 1) *anonymous / pseudonymous* 2) *asynchronous* and 3) *lacking of cues of communication*. They are also *largely text-based* -and of course *computer-mediated*. (e.g. Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Chiu et al. 2006). In addition to these qualities we can further derive some specific qualities of virtual communities made possible by the Internet as a context.

First of all, virtual communities are driven by **volitional choice** (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). This means the membership of virtual communities can be easily terminated. The groups are entered and de-entered anonymously. In addition, the membership is immaterial, in that it is purely defined by who visits the community and not for example by a geographical area. This also makes virtual communities highly **fluid**, with a stream of constantly changing members. (Komito, 1998) For example Butler (1999) found that 22% of members in the list servers he studied dropped out every year. However, double this number also joined the community every year.

Because virtual communities are volitional and they lack the cues of traditional communications, most virtual communities are based on a **specific common interest**. Because the members don't judge each other by outer attributes and are not "forced" to a community because of exterior factors (work, school, family, neighborhood) more importance is placed on shared interests, values, demographic attributes, diseases or other factors overarching all members. (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002)

Because the virtual communities exist immaterially and asynchronously and are largely text-based, participating in these communities can be characterized as **"creating and consuming content."** Although other forms of participating exist, by far the most important and salient feature of most virtual communities is consuming what other members have created and creating new content to the site for others to consume (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Butler et al. 2007).

All and all, it can be thus said that the Internet as a context shapes virtual communities in following ways:

- Virtual communities are driven by voluntary participation

- Virtual communities are usually build around a specific shared interest, were it a demographical attribute, value, ideology, hobby or any other type of interest
- Virtual community participation consists of two main practices: creating and consuming content.

Virtual communities, as unique as they are, also share a lot of qualities we commonly associate with communities and communality. Let's now look at what features virtual communities share with other communities.

Firstly, let's look at the one defining feature, that makes the virtual community a community: '**consciousness of a kind**' (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). As described by Bagozzi & Dholakia (2002) consciousness of a kind means "*an intrinsic connection to other members and a collective sense of separation of other members*"

The consciousness of kind is also related to the concept of *social identity*. According to Bagozzi (2000) social identity is achieved and manifested through members of a group having :

- self-awareness of membership
- feeling of belongingness
- collective self esteem

Thus, people who are members of virtual communities have to be conscious of belonging into one and some kind of feeling of responsibility of their community. For example Okleshen & Grossbart (1998) have studied Usenet groups noticing that perceived membership of the community is increased by posting in the community. With avid posting and high perceived membership comes placing more value to the group's content. This would imply to us that there truly exists feelings of belongingness and self-awareness of membership in virtual communities. This would also hint to us that to be a member of a virtual community one must take part in both of the two main forms of participation: creation and consumption of content.

Later on, we will also learn that reciprocity is a strong motivation in participating to virtual communities (e.g. Butler, 2007) which would imply that there exists a collective self esteem in virtual communities.

Virtual communities also have their own **conventions and jargon** (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). As we have learned, language is important for virtual communities group identity, perhaps this also makes developing own jargon and language especially salient in virtual communities. For example in the context of Usenet groups phrases and abbreviations is common and used to define who belongs to the community and who doesn't (Donath, 1998). This idea is also supported for example by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) who propose that brand communities, a one type of virtual community, are

defined by having shared traditions and rituals.

In addition to these features, virtual communities have also one important characteristic called **pseudonymity**. Even though anonymity exists in CMC, in virtual communities identity is often highly important (e.g. Turkle 1995; Donath, 1998). Thus, similarly to other communities, we still need an identity to function in a virtual community. On the other hand, specifically in virtual communities this identity can be entirely separable from or real life (RL) identity.

For example Meyer's (1989) study on the computer underground showed that computer hackers are reluctant to change their nicknames, although changing their pseudonym would protect them from legal repercussions. The identity and reputation attached to a nickname are so important in the hacker community that changing it would defeat the purpose of the whole hacking: under another nickname the hacker would lose the gained status. (Meyer, 1989)

One way to understand pseudonymity and virtual communities is Turkle's (1995) much referred notion of how the Internet can, with its multiple venues and anonymousness, create a sort *sandbox of identities*: on the Internet you can safely experiment your self without risking disapproval or social shunning in real life. With the help of virtual communities we can rapidly cycle through various identities and roles. New identity of the Internet age implies multiplicity, heterogeneity and fragmentation (Turkle, 1995).

In conclusion virtual communities share three features with other communities:

- Consciousness of a kind or feeling of collective responsibility
- An identity connected to that community
- Shared rituals and jargon understood by other members

4.5. General Motivations to Participation in Virtual Communities

Now, we have established what makes a virtual community. Next, let's look at the motivations to participate in virtual communities. From these motivations to participate in general we can later draw when thinking of why to engage in disinhibited behavior in the communities.

In this thesis, I have concentrated on studies that research the motivation for participating in uncommercial virtual communities, not tied to a brand or especially to a workplace. This is because I feel that these studies are best on par on what might be the motivation to participating in Reddit be: motivations and barriers to participate in commercialized communities might be completely different.

Butler et al. (2007) studied community effort in list servers by drafting 385 people from 121 different lists. In their study, Butler et al. (2007) found people, who valued the benefits they gained from

participating in the groups most, also did the most community building. Thus *reciprocity* was seen as the reason for participating. Butler et al. (2007) also found that *social benefits*, like making friends and talking to people, were especially encouraging people to build and participate in the community.

On the other hand Wasko & Faraj (2000) studied three Usenet groups focused on technology. They found that reasons for sharing knowledge in these communities happened for three reasons:

- **Tangible returns** (21.5%) referred in this study: status gain, professional advances made, finding information not available elsewhere and getting help to a specific problem.
- **Intangible returns** (19.9%) in this study referred to enjoying the experience of learning, sharing knowledge and answering challenges, thus they were the more hedonistic gains.
- **Community interest** (41.9%) were the social benefits of participating community. In this study the participant valued interaction and collaboration with interesting members, and believed in reciprocity and altruism: it was widely believed that you have to give back to the community and that to develop as a society we must share our knowledge.

Unlike Butler et al. (2007), Wasko & Faraj's (2000) study did not find other social benefits, like making friends or getting emotional support to be an important factor in the knowledge sharing. This could be, because the studied communities were all very information-centered: focusing on the newest technological advancements of C++ doesn't maybe encourage emotional support. For example Okleshen & Grossbart (1998) also suggest that Usenet groups might be more information-centered than traditional communities.

A more psychological perspective on why do people share online can be found from the research on *knowledge sharing in virtual communities*. Member-generated content is the backbone of virtual communities (Chiu et al. 2006, *multia*) and according to some researchers (Chiu et al. 2006) it even is what defines a virtual community more than anything else. Thus a lot of research has been dedicated to how and why individuals choose to share knowledge in a virtual community (e.g. Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Butler et al. 2002; Bagozzi & Dholakia 2002; Chiu et al. 2006).

A psychological approach for why people participate in especially knowledge sharing, in virtual communities can be found from the **social cognitive theory** (Hsu et al., 2006). The social cognitive theory, in its current form mainly coined by Bandura (1986), has been widely approved in the information systems literature (Hsu et al., 2006). Basically, social cognitive theory states that we learn by observing others: humans learn by copying others and repeating the action is related to whether we are rewarded or punished by this behavior and the outcome of the behavior. Hsu et al. (2006) especially pick two core concepts from the social cognitive theory: outcome expectations and self-efficacy.

Outcome expectations are the rational side of our actions: when we expect a positive outcome from our actions we will act a certain way. The positive outcome can come in forms of tangible or intangible returns like physical rewards, enjoyment, status gain or other positive outcomes. On the other hand, expected negative outcomes like pain, negative attention or status loss might weaken our willing to participate. It is a central concept of the SCT (social cognitive theory) that these expectations don't need to actually realize, it is enough that we have learned that they usually come true from observing others. (Hsu et al., 2006)

Self-efficacy on the other hand is a form of self-evaluation that influences our behavior greatly. If we believe in our own capability to execute certain behavior successfully, we are much more likely to execute it. In the context of virtual communities and knowledge-sharing self-efficacy usually refers to whether people believe they have interesting, relevant and useful contributions to make to the community. (Hsu et al., 2006)

Hsu et al.'s (2006) study on virtual communities show that both personal outcome expectations and self-efficacy have significant influence on people's willingness to contribute knowledge on virtual communities. Especially anticipated reciprocity and the possibility to improve relationship with other members of the community seem to affect positively to participation to virtual communities. On the other hand in Hsu et al.'s (2006) study community-related outcome expectations didn't play a role in people's motivation to participate. This might be since Hsu et al.'s (2006) study was again conducted in an information-based virtual communities (Yahoo! Groups and professional associations).

In a similar study the almost same researcher group conducted the same year **social capital theory** was researched in the context of knowledge-sharing in virtual communities. The social capital theory basically states that social networks have value to us: in a similar way to for example education or objects, our social networks and the knowledge embedded within can help us to cope in our day-to-day life better (Chiu et al. 2006). This value also greatly effects on how and what information we share. (Chiu et al. 2006)

The concept of social capital and how Internet affects it has also been studied before. In a famous article discussing the long-term decline of social capital in American society, Robert Putnam suggested that the Internet was partly to blame for this. However, Wellman et al. (2001) suggest that the Internet is more likely to supplement social capital bringing us new ways to connect with family members, participate organizationally and engage in communities.

On the contrary to their other study, in this study, conducted on a well known professional virtual community in Taiwan called BlueShop, Chiu et al. (2006) found that community-related outcome expectations, rather than individual ones played a key role in motivating people to share information. Similarly to Wasko and Faraj's later finding (2005) Chiu et al. also found that although reciprocity increased they amount of information members shared, it didn't increase the quality.

In conclusion, it seems that the mechanisms of why people share information online are still unclear to us. There exists no-one theory seems to hold completely true from research to research. It could be because different communities have such different motivational mechanisms: it seems that some communities seem to support individual's benefits and others' communal ones. One of the key concepts, that do seem to hold true is reciprocity or rather the **norm of reciprocity**. It would seem that when people do seek a balance on what they feel the community gives to them and what they give back to it (Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Chiu et al., 2006; Hsu et al., 2006; Butler et al., 2007, even when the social benefits of the community are not that important to them. Like an interviewee of Wasko & Faraj (2000) says:

"I consider almost a fee paying group. Do you get an answer for giving an answer. This isn't a rule or anything, but I try to go by that guideline."

To study more the more the reciprocity and outcome expectations as motivators in communities, let's next look at the participation through the concepts of intentional social action (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002) and we-intentions (Tuomela, 1995).

Bagozzi (2000) conceptualizes the virtual community participation as **intentional social action**. Deriving from social psychology intentional social action means that community members act intentionally (volitionally, purposefully and goal-orientally) and that these actions have a collective basis. The idea that there is a collective basis for these intentions is closely related to the concept of we-intentions (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002).

We-intentions derive from our narratives, stating that as there is a way of saying "*I intend to open my computer today*" there also exists the intention of we e.g. "*We will sort it out later on.*" These we-intentions are according to Bagozzi & Dholakia (2002) connected to having a social identity of seeing oneself as part of a particular group, like a virtual community. As a member of the community you can act as an sort agent of the community stating what the group intents.

The philosopher Raimo Tuomela (1995) states that we-intentions occur under following four conditions:

1. Two or more members of a collectivity agree to jointly perform an action on behalf of the collectivity.
2. Each member intends to perform his or her own part contributory to the group action.
3. Members individually and mutually believe that the opportunity for joint action is likely to occur and the members will perform their parts

4. The intention to perform one's part is determined in part by the aforementioned individual and mutual beliefs.

In addition to these statements, Tuomela (1995) reminds us that these intentions are totally subjective: it is enough for a member to feel like these conditions are fulfilled to act out we-intentions. Bagozzi & Dholakia (2002) quantitatively studied the philosophical concept of we-intentions in the context of virtual communities: confirming that they do seem to exist in the context of virtual communities.

4.6. Conclusions

There are four main characteristics of virtual communities that are defined by the context of virtual communities being computer-mediated communities: *volitional participation, creation around specific shared interest* and *content creation and consumption as main practices*.

On the other hand, virtual communities possess features we commonly associate with communities and communality. These features include: *consciousness of kind* and *shared rituals and jargon*. In addition, virtual community participants seem to have an identity specific to that community, which in the context of the virtual communities is referred to as *pseudonymity*.

Why do people engage in virtual communities? As we have learned, the mechanisms for participation are still unclear: it seems that the motivations to participate are as diverse as the people participating virtual communities and the communities themselves. However, it is clear that there are tangible and intangible and social and individual reasons to participate in virtual communities. It is important to note that according to various researchers, we do not participate in virtual communities purely for selfish and individualistic reasons, but a sense of collective identity, reciprocity or community interest also plays a strong role. (Järvenpää et al., 1999; Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Ridings et al. 2002; Chiu et al., 2006; Hsu et al., 2006; Butler et al., 2007)

5. The Online Disinhibition Effect

5.1. Overview

We have now looked at the discourse on computer-mediated communications, virtual communities as well as the Internet and changing modes of thinking. These three themes are all essential in painting the context in which online disinhibition effect occurs in virtual communities. Now, keeping this context in mind, we can move on, to look at the online disinhibition effect itself and how it has been studied.

As in other chapters, I will first offer a brief outlook on how the discourse on online disinhibition effect was born, and then move on to discuss the effect in more detail. I will first look at the findings of the “father” of online disinhibition effect, Joseph Walter (1996, 1997, 2007). Then I will move on to Suler’s, who coined the term in 2004, findings. Lastly, I will look at the psychological perspectives on online disinhibition effect, connecting the effect to theories presented by notable psychologists such as Zimbardo (1970) and Reicher (1986) through the study conducted by Postmes & Spears (1998).

5.2. The Discourse on Online Disinhibition Effect

How does the computer mediation effect to our way of saying things? Are CMC communications inherently different? Can we form meaningful relationships online? These were just some of the questions communication and social psychology research asked during the 1990’s.

In the beginning of CMC studies it was assumed that computers as a medium were very limited. In fact, CMC was accused as too confined a medium for both task-related (Daft & Lengel 1984: 201) and personal communications (Dubrovsky, Kiesler & Sethna 1991: 119). In other words, FtF communications were seen as the superior form for creating personal relationships, and for getting things done.

However, as computers and communication through them grew more common, alternative views emerged. Why would anyone use CMC if it is with was as limited as suggested (Walther, 1996)?

Halfway through the decade reports, where CMC was described just as or even more personal than FtF communications started to appear. One of the first and most influential articles reconceptualizing the view of CMC was Walther’s article (1996) *“Computer-Mediated Communication: Impersonal, Interpersonal and Hyperpersonal Interaction.”* Let’s look at his findings next.

5.3. Impersonal, Interpersonal and Hyperpersonal

In his ground-breaking article, Walther (1996) introduced a three-part dissection of the effects of computer-mediation on communication:

The impersonal interaction refers to the task-oriented side of CMC communications: according to Walther's studies computer-mediation can be very impersonal at times. When people are studied in mediated groups comparing FtF and CMC, CMC can enhance group decision and task-focusedness by allowing a group not to focus on socio-emotional communications: when you don't need to be polite or personal, you will focus on getting the job done. (Walther, 1996)

Interpersonal CMC perspective, refers to the more personal type of CMC communication. Against what was then commonly thought, Walther argued that when people are given the expectation that they might work and interact with the same people in the future, they are more friendly and seek information on one another in CMC communications. According to Walther, CMC is only less personal than FtF when people don't expect to have long term relationships with each other. (Walther 1996).

Hyperpersonal perspective refers to when CMC surpasses the level of affection and emotion of parallel FtF: and it is Walther's most significant and referred-to finding (Walther, 1996). Hyperpersonal mode of communication refers to when in the absence of the face-to-face-cues and personal knowledge on each other, CMC partners are willing to disclose more personal information about themselves (Walther, 1996).

One interviewee of Henderson & Gilding (2004), called Steve, describes hyperpersonal communications in a following way:

"Online you have to get more personal sometimes because you are strictly a one-dimensional entity on a screen, whereas in person you display your emotions a little bit more visually at times. Maybe online you have to disclose a bit more."

The hyperpersonal perspective has been offered plenty of proof in preceding and consequential studies. For example three studies done by Joinson (2001) suggest that visual anonymity typical to computer-mediated communication creates higher levels of self-disclosure. In addition Tidwell & Walther's study (2002) suggested that CMC lead to higher proportions of intimate questions and lower proportions of peripheral questions, as opposed to parallel FtF.

5.4. Overattribution, Selective Self-presentation and Intensified Feedback-loop

Why are people more intimate online? In 1996 Walther connected lack of cues, asynchronicity and anonymity to hyperpersonal behavior in computer mediated environment. Walther reasoned that CMC communicators take part of an *"overattribution process"*. This means that in the scarcity of other cues communicators place more importance on the subtle messages in text.

Also, because the communicator doesn't need to concentrate on making and reading physical cues, he is free to concentrate more on expressing themselves through text. (Walther, 1996). Asynchronicity also makes it possible to concentrate on these text-based messages with greater care and emotion, no immediate responses are needed (Walther, 1997).

Thus, in Walther's hyperpersonal model the main reason for hyperpersonal behavior lies in managing impressions and facilitating wanted relationships. (Walther, 1996, 2006). Walther calls this phenomena (2007) *"selective self-presentation."* The communicators wish to present themselves in as positive light as possible for the other person. (Walther, 2007).

Support for selective self-presentation existing online can be found from numerous other articles as well (e.g. Schau & Gilly, 2003; Ellison et al. 2006; Bargh et al., 2002). As one of Shau & Gilly's interviewees, 28-year-old doctoral student Fred, puts it:

"The site is me. It is the me I want to communicate; the me I am most proud of"

In addition, Ellison et al.'s (2006) study on online dating shows that there seems to be a conflict between portraying a truthful and portraying a favorable depiction of themselves. Some interviewees of Ellison et. al. (2006) described situations where others had created an online profile that reflected their ideal self, not their actual self. For example, an interviewee identified as Christo1 explained:

"For instance, I am also an avid hiker and [scuba diver] and sometimes I have communicated with someone that has presented themselves the same way, but then it turns out they like scuba diving but they haven't done it for 10 years, they like hiking but they do it once every second year . . . I think they may not have tried to lie; they just have perceived themselves differently because they write about the person they want to be . . . In their profile they write about their dreams as if they are reality"

Others admitted presenting and envisioning their idealized self in their profile:

"I sort of thought about what is my ideal self. Because when you date, you present your best foot forward. I thought about all the qualities that I have, you know, even if I sometimes make mistakes and stuff. . . . And also got together the best picture I had, and kind of came up with what I thought my goals were at the time, because I thought that was an important thing to stress."

More often than not people are not purposefully writing about their idealized self rather than their real self, they might just see themselves differently when others. Ellison et al. (2006) describes this as the concept of 'foggy mirror' based on one of the interviewees, identified as KarieK, explanation:

"People like to write about themselves. Sometimes it's not truthful, but it's how they see themselves and that gives you a different slant on an individual. This is how they really see themselves. Sometimes you will see a person who weighs 900 pounds and—this is just an exaggeration—and they will have on spandex, you'll think, "God, I wish I had their mirror, because obviously their mirror tells them they look great." It's the same thing with online."

In addition to the context of online dating or websites of self, presenting an idealized version of self is also common in other places of the web, for example on MUDs (Turkle, 1995). According to Turkle's (1995) extensive study on MUDs (multi-user domain dungeon games) most of the people engaging in this form of online role-playing were actually presenting idealized versions of themselves in their avatars. For example, Turkle's (1995:190) interviewee Gordon has many different characters on different MUDs, but they all have one thing in common. They have qualities Gordon is trying to develop to himself. Various other MUD players stated something similar (Turkle, 1995).

Third key element in Walther's theory is also the *"intensified feedback loop"*, meaning that higher levels of self-disclosure by each communicators creates an never ending loop, where both parties feel more and more comfortable or obliged to disclose personal information (Walther, 1997).

Support for the feedback loop can be found from Jiang et al. (2011) who found a connection not only between enhanced intimacy and self-disclosure on CMC compared to FtF, but that this enhanced intimacy and self-disclosure only existed when both respondents were disclosing information about themselves. When the other communicator didn't participate in high self-disclosure, no enhanced self-disclosure existed.

Hardey's (2000) study on online dating also offers an interesting view on intensified feedback loop: one interviewee describes the online dating process as following:

"One of the main things I found when I started using Interdate was that I could have conversations with men that would not have happened if I met them in person. I feel like you communicate on a different level on the Web. It allows you to get into emotional things that men often don't feel comfortable with unless they have known you for a long time."

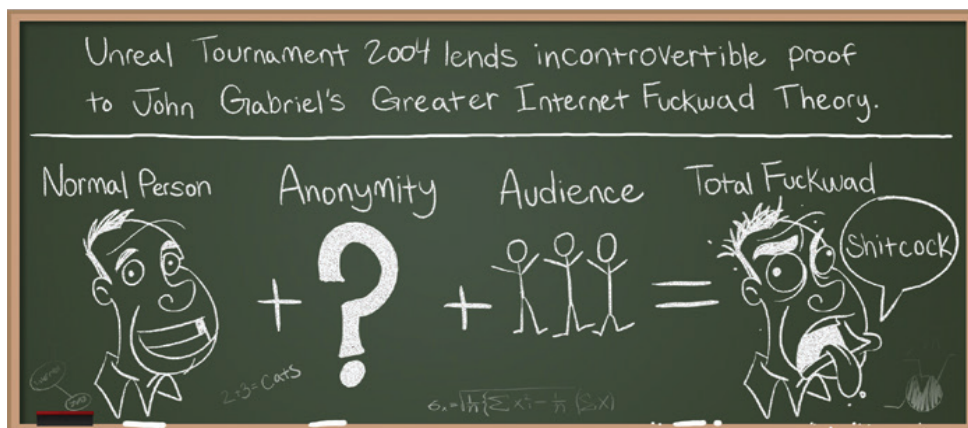
Other theories and names to the hyperpersonal model exist. Next, we will look how Suler (2004) explains similar phenomena through the concept of the online disinhibition effect.

5.5. Benign and Toxic Disinhibition

As we have already noted people say and do things on the Internet, they wouldn't normally do (e.g. Suler, 2004). Suler (2004) names the intensive acts of self-disclosure or acting out as *the online disinhibition effect*. The online disinhibition effect is more concerned with all kind of disinhibited behavior online, whereas Walther as an early CMC pioneer, was more concerned with person-to-person communication.

Suler (2004) divides the online disinhibition effect in two parts. *Benign disinhibition* means the hyperpersonal side of disinhibition: sharing personal emotions, fears and wishes as well as showing unusual acts of kindness and generosity.

Toxic disinhibition, however, refers to the rude language, harsh criticism, threats and anger we witness everyday on the Internet, as well as the dark side of the Internet: crime, drugs, violence and hate-groups (Suler, 2004). This phenomena is not unnoticed on the Net and it's probably familiar to anyone who uses Internet to browse for example message boards. For example, if we were to believe the popular online comic Penny Arcade (Penny Arcade 2004): any normal person, given the cloak of anonymity and a listening audience might turn to offensive behavior.



The Penny Arcade comic "Green Blackboards (And Other Anomalies)" (Penny Arcade, 2004)

The effects of the toxic online disinhibition can be spotted for example in so-called '*flaming*' or '*flamewars*', meaning offensive and heated discussion on the Internet consisting of arguing, anonymous participants (McKenna&Bargh, 2000). Researchers have also found that people behave more blunty, aggressively and nonconformingly on CMC, compared to FTF (Dubrovsky Kiesler & Sethna, 1991). In his essay on virtual communities Rheingold (1995) describes this behavior in following way:

"Since the physical absence of other people also seems to loosen some of the social bonds that prevent people from insulting one another in person, misunderstandings can grow into truly nasty stuff..."

In Henderson's & Gilding's article (2004), interviewee called Kyle describes their own online disinhibition in a following way:

"When I'm angry, I've learnt it's better to jump online and have a chat to the people who are always around and know what I'm like. Or if I'm really angry, I'll find a chatroom I don't go into often and find someone to pick a fight with."

In addition to flaming, '**trolling**' is another form of online disinhibition. Trolling happens when a person tries to pass as a legitimate member of a certain Internet community: a troll might share the community's interests, concerns and ideas. At the same time the troller will try to disrupt the group by sharing hostile, aggressive or otherwise reaction-inducing ideas, questions or other content. A Usenet member describes trolling as following (Donath, 1998):

"Are you familiar with fishing? Trolling is where you set your fishing lines in the water and then slowly go back and forth dragging the bait and hoping for a bite. Trolling on the Net is the same concept - someone baits a post and then waits for the bite on the line and then enjoys the ensuing fight."

Trolling can be harmful for a virtual community because it disrupts the discussion, decreases the amount of false information and increases mistrust. An example of trolling can be found for rec.motorcycles a usenet group focused on free-wheeling where *"tough-guy banter mixes with advice about riding techniques and equipment"*. While the group respects the capability of riding a challenging bike, endangering other's and yourself by exceeding your capabilities is frowned upon. In the group, this following provocative text was posted (Donath, 1998):

"Hi. I am a college junior and am interested in buying my first motorcycle. I've seen the Kawasaki ZX11 and think it looks pretty hot. Would this be a good bike to buy. Money is no problem. My dad will buy me anything I want. Also, I've heard that you should get a turbo kit from Mr. Turbo in Houston, because the bike needs more power. Any other modifications suggested? Also, where should I go to learn to ride?"

Derick Nichols, Tulane University"

While some readers took the post seriously, others immediately claimed it was trolling. Some of the posters were even more offended that the trolling was bad as opposed to being offended of the original deception. (Donath, 1998)

5.6. Suler & Online Disinhibition Effect

Suler (2004) lists six reasons as the causes of the online disinhibition effect:

Dissociative anonymity describes the way anonymity of CMC communication makes it possible for people to separate their actions online from their in-person identity. Because of this, the online self can become compartmentalized part of self: the moral consequences and superego restriction can be put on shelf and the responsibilities of hostile behavior can be avoided (Suler 2004). Henderson and Gilding's (2004) interviewee Multi-User Domain (MUD) player describes this compartmentalization in a following way:

"I'm there on the understanding that I'm not really a wizard in real life. No one enters a role-playing game with the intention to be who they are in real life. I just can't make friends with a sorcerer from the fourteenth century. If Gandark the Wiz has problems, he will share them with the other online characters. If Adrian has problems, he'll share them with his face-to-face friends."

As been discussed before, *asynchrony* refers to the time insensitive side of online communication. In the context of online disinhibition asynchrony is vitally relevant because it makes it possible for insulter or flamer not having to cope with other people's reactions immediately or at all (Suler, 2004). Kali Munro, an online psychotherapist, describes this behavior as *"emotional hit and run"* (Suler 2004: K. Munro, unpublished observations, 2003).

Solipsistic introjection is connected to the lack of cues and text-basedness of CMC communications (Suler, 2004). According to Suler, the lack of cues can cause a person to project their own voices and visual images to people. This can cause all kinds of fantasies, role plays and unconscious psychological effects (Suler 2004). Solipsistic introjection is sort of the counter part of selective self-presentation presented by Walther (1996): when we cannot rely on other cues, we do not only select what we present of for others but also we project our own thoughts selectively on them.

Dissociative imagination suggests that when we "escape" to the online world and to our online persona we can dissociate the online world completely from the real world: making it a make-believe dimension where real world responsibilities don't exist (Suler, 2004). According to Suler, this kind of behavior especially exists in fantasy game environments, but it can influence all the dimensions of online communication to some point (2004).

Minimization of status and authority refers to the lack of authority and authoritarian cues on the Internet (Suler, 2004). In the absence of authority figures, people are less afraid of punishment and more free to say what they really think: on the Internet, everyone has equal voice and equal opportunity to voice themselves (Suler, 2004).

In addition to these reasons Suler (2004) also discussed *invisibility* and *asynchrony* as reasons for the online disinhibition text. However, in this thesis, we already discussed these themes as part of the basic components of CMC. I feel, that while these features are probably crucial to the creation of online disinhibition effect they are not as explanations as they are preexisting condition.

In addition to these six dimensions, Suler also reminds us that there exists great *individual differences* between who and how we exhibit the online disinhibition effect. Despite of Penny Arcade's statement, not everyone is necessarily offensive in world of Internet. As Kyle, who we met previously, states:

"I'm a fairly angry person. I'm the first to admit that I have a quick temper which is fueled by a lot of problems in my life... - I'll find a chatroom I don't go into often and find someone to pick a fight with. This way, there are no consequences, and it's a lot better than me trashing the house or beating up anyone who comes near me. That is what I did before I discovered the Internet."

Another perspective to online disinhibition effect is provided to us by Labidot-Lefler & Barak (2012). Lapidot-Lefler & Barak (2012) studied the causes of toxic disinhibition in a quantitative matter comparing the effects of anonymity, invisibility and lack of eye-contact on disinhibited toxic behavior. Interestingly, their findings state that unlike previous researchers have theoreticized (Suler, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000) toxic behavior seems to be prompted, not so much by anonymity, but by lack of visual cues.

While sense of invisibility contributed to the overall bad atmosphere, and sense of anonymity prompted threats, *enforced eye-contact lessened all forms of toxic behavior*. A possible explanation for this is offered: perhaps eye-contact is something that as an act itself makes our sense of invisibility and concealed identity disappear (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). These findings are also supportive of the idea that anonymity is crucial to the formal of online disinhibition effect.

5.7. Psychological Perspectives on Online Disinhibition Effect

Why do people engage in more intimate and disinhibited behavior in CMC? In addition to simply explaining the effects and nature of CMC two psychological phenomena are widely used to explain this behaviour (e.g. Walther, 1997; Postmes & Spears, 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

5.7.1. Deindividuation Model

Firstly, the popular concept of **deindividuation** can be used to explain the online disinhibition or hyperpersonality effect. When person's self-awareness is blocked or reduced environmentally, through things like uniforms, darkened rooms, masks etc. deindividuation can occur. (Zimbardo, 1970) In the deindividual state the person doesn't regulate his behavior as much, reacting on cues based on their current emotional state rather than rationality or long-term effects of their behavior, not caring what others say or think of them (Zimbardo, 1970).

All of this leads to disinhibited, highly impulsive and aggressive behavior. On the FtF environment deindividuation can have extremely negative effects, as proved by the famous Stanford prison experiment, which through anonymity, strong group dynamics and diffusion of responsibility made ordinary(ish) college students act aggressively and sadistically. (Zimbardo, 1970; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). McKenna and Bargh (2000) argue that on the Internet, the self-awareness of a person is not blocked by masks but rather by the anonymous nature of CMC communications.

On the other hand a meta-analysis conducted by Postmes & Spears (1998) on 60 studies on deindividuation seemed to provide that the deindividuation cannot be solely responsible for increased disinhibition. The effects of blocked self-awareness seemed to vary from strong support to deindividuation theory to strong support for the opposite (that reducing sense of individuality actually decreases disinhibition) (Postmes & Spears 1998). This study seems to support Reicher's, Spears & Postmes's (1995) own *social identity model of deindividuation phenomena (SIDE)*.

5.7.2. The SIDE Model

The basis of SIDE model was first introduced by Reicher (1982). His analysis on a person's identity was based on the notion that people have multiple social and individual identities. Thus he argued that deindividuation doesn't actually happen because people lose their own identity, but rather because they *replace individual identity with a group identity*. When people are acting as a mob, they are actually following the social codes and norms of the mob.

The SIDE model takes Reicher's views to the digital world, arguing that factors that have traditionally been seen as causing deindividuation, like anonymity or lack of cues, are actually reinforcing group salience and making people conform to the group norms more (Spears & Lea 1992, Postmes et al., 1998). Now we can look at Kyle's statement again (Henderson & Gilding, 2004):

*"I'm a fairly angry person. I'm the first to admit that I have a quick temper which is fueled by a lot of problems in my life. When I'm angry, I've learnt it's better to jump online and **have a chat to the people who are always around and know what I'm like**. Or if I'm really angry, I'll find a chatroom I don't go into often and find someone to pick a fight with. This way, there are no consequences, and it's a lot better than me trashing the house or beating up anyone who comes near me. That is what I did before I discovered the Internet."*

Maybe Kyle is not only angry: he has also found a forum, where *it is accepted to be angry*.

Is disinhibited behavior more accepted in the online environment? If it is, why is that? From Granic & Lamey (2000) we have learned, that Internet might encourage efficacy beliefs, perspectivistic world view and critical thinking. All of these are factors that might encourage us to voice our opin-

ions strongly even in if it leads to arguments, criticize others and disrespect moral norms of IRL.

5.8. Conclusions

The difference between CMC and FtF culminates into the hyperpersonal perspective (Walther, 1996) or as I have decided to call it: the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). The online disinhibition effect states that online people behave more intimately and disinhibitedly than in the real world. People are more willing to enclose personal information and surrender to their emotions. This phenomena can actualize in revealing secrets, showing unusual acts of kindness or in aggressive, rude and hostile behavior (Suler, 2004).

A lot of explanations on the online disinhibition effect are offered, including *selective self-presentation* (Walter, 2007), *intensified feedback loop* (Walther 1997), *dissociative anonymity*, *solipstic introjection* (Suler, 2004) as well as *deindividuation theory* (McKenna & Bargh, 2000) and *SIDE model* (Postmes et, al, 1998). I would further categorize these reasons into three categories of explanations:

1. Feelings of alienation and differentiation from IRL identity (*dissociative anonymity*, *dissociative imagination*, *solipstic introjection* (Suler, 2004), *deindividuation theory* (McKenna & Bargh, 2000)). These explanations gather support from stating that when a person acts online, they are acting as a separate entity from their offline persona, thus making disinhibited behaviour easier. This behavior is mainly encouraged by the pseudonymity of virtual communities. This behavior is described by Henderson and Gilding's (2004) interviewee Multi-User Domain (MUD) player:

"If Gandark the Wiz has problems, he will share them with the other online characters. If Adrian has problems, he'll share them with his face-to-face friends."

2. More selective and intimate wordings prompted by the lack of cues, asynchrony of text-basedness of CMC communications (*selective self-presentation*, *intensified feedback loop* (Walther 1997)). These explanations draw support from the fact that CMC gives us a possibility to moderate our behavior and encourages us to be more intimate because we have no other cues of communications. As Hardey's (2000) interviewee describes:

"I feel like you communicate on a different level on the Web. It allows you to get into emotional things that men often don't feel comfortable with unless they have known you for a long time"

3. The different behavioral models and moral standards of the Internet culture. (*SIDE model*, *Postmes et. al, 1998, , minimization of status and authority*) This reasoning draws from the

fact that what is okay in IRL differs from what is okay in virtual communities. In addition when we are functioning online we are more salient to conforming to group standards. In this model the *consciousness of kind* typical to virtual communities is essential. As Kyle says (Henderson & Gilding, 2004):

*"When I'm angry, I've learnt it's better to jump online and **have a chat to the people who are always around and know what I'm like.**"*

6. Empowerment and Identity in the Age of Internet

6.1. Overview

We have now looked at the three perspectives on the context of online disinhibition effect in Reddit. We have also delved deep in to the concept of online disinhibition effect and the cognitive processes that might be behind it. Lastly, I would like to look at two concepts: empowerment and identity on the age of Internet.

6.2. Background

Many identity researchers (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 2002; Harter, 1999; Valkenburg et al., 2006,) divide a person's conception of self into two different concepts: **self** and **identity**. The difference between self and identity is that while an individual has only one notion of self, he/she can have multiple identities in different contexts like family, friends, work school or hobbies (Harter, 1999). One compact way of defining identity is to use the definition of Finkenauer et al. (2002:2):

"Identity represents the aspect of the self that is accessible and salient in a particular context and that interacts with the environment"

What is self then? Some researchers argue (e.g. Donath, 1998) that the body is a good way to anchor identity: it is a stabilizing factor that provides and anchor to one's self. Quoting Sartre (1959): *"I am my body to the extend that I am."* However, in the context of the Internet, the body does not exist, as CMC is immaterial (Belk, 2013). A more fruitful approach to the concept of self might thus be the concept of **extended self**.

Highly popular in the consumer behavior, the concept of extended self was solidified by the publication of Belk's "Possession and the extended self" (1988) (Ahuvia, 2005). Extended self as concept explores the meaning of possessions to identity (Belk, 1988). Belk (1988) argues, that the key to understanding our relationship with possessions is to understand that - knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally - we see our possessions as being part of ourselves (Belk, 1988). The notion is not new, as it was already introduced in the 19th century:

"A man's self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and yacht and bank account...." (Belk, 1988: Williams, 1890)

The concept of extended self in its' heart means that a person's self is not tied by physical borders or

clear distinctions, it can cover a vast amount of possessions, with various degrees of selfness attached to them. Possessions are not just physical items, they can be other people, ideas, places etc. Our possessions remind us of who we are, what we have done and maybe even, where we are headed. (Belk 1988)

Higgins (1987), on the other hand discusses the concept of self and identity through arguing that there are three domains of self: the actual self, the ideal self and the ought self. The *actual self* refers to the attributes the person actually has, the *ideal self* to the ones he/she would like to possess while the *ought self* refers to the qualities the person ought to have. Identity conflicts arise when person experiences discrepancies between these different selves.

Another concept of self that is essential for our examination of identity in the age of Internet is the concept of *true self*. The concept of true self stems from Rogers (1951). Rogers (1951) theoreticized that therapy is a work towards discovering one's true self. In Rogers' (1951) notion true self is something that exists psychologically "inside of us" (unlike ideal or ought self) but is not fully expressed in person's current actual self.

6.3. Identity in the Age of Internet

The rise of digitality and virtual communities has broadened the concept of extended self even further. Virtual worlds, bulletin boards, mp3-music, online games and other digital technologies have created an almost endlessly vast amount of ways to extend ourselves. (Belk, 2013). When we are not limited by the constraints of physical body, distances or material world new modes of self-expression have arisen to the world (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Identity also plays an important role in CMC and virtual communities. When communicating with others, knowing their identity is essential for understanding and evaluating that interaction. Still, identity is at best ambiguous over the Internet: because of immateriality, anonymity and invisibility the forming of identity on the Internet differs greatly from the real world (Donath, 1998). As said before: "*On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog.*"

Even with the sparseness of cues in the virtual world, identity exists and thrives (Donath, 1998). For example Meyer's (1989) study on the computer underground showed that computer hackers are reluctant to change their nicknames, although changing their pseudonym would protect them from legal repercussions. The identity and reputation attached to a nickname are so important in the hacker community that changing it would defeat the purpose of the whole hacking: under another nickname the hacker would lose the gained status. Thus, Internet identity can be so important to a person that he/she is willing to risk his/her real life identity's reputation to preserve it.

One way to understand identity in the age of Internet is Turkle's (1995) much referred notion of

how the Internet can, with its multiple venues and anonymousness, create a sort sandbox of identities: on the Internet you can safely experiment your self without risking disapproval or social shunning in real life. How is this sand box for identities formed?

Interacting online has many of the same pressures and desires than real life interactions (Ellison et al., 2006). Still, with the lack of cues, assessing identity online is a complex process where the remaining cues are looked at to adapt impressions of others (Donath, 1999; Walther, 1992). Donath's (1998) study on Usenet group's found that important markers of identity in the context of Usenet (a bulletin-board system's predecessor form 1980s) are:

- The persons username or email pseudonym (anonymous posting is often frowned upon).
- What the person chooses to convey about him/herself through the text (impressions given).
- What can be read between the lines, from the person's choices of words (impressions given off).

In the context of Usenet, language is thus the simple most important part of self-presentation and identity. Language can be used to recognize users, to identify their socio-economical status or other attributes. This is supported by Ellison et al.'s (2006) study on self presentation in online dating, which suggest that subtle cues, like right spelling are important in self-presentation. One of their interviewees describes why they look for well-written dating profiles in a following way:

"If I am getting email from someone that obviously can't spell or put a full sentence together, I'm thinking what other parts of his life suffer from the same lack of attentiveness?"

Schau & Gilly (2003) have explored the concept of self-presentation in personal web space, a more versatile space opposed to Usenet groups, by asking:

"If 'we are what we have' (Belk 1988) and 'I link, therefore, I am' (Hafner 1999, so does it follow that we are what we post?"*

In the context of self presentation online, the themes of the *ideal* and *true self* are constantly emerging (e.g. Schau & Gilly, 2003; Ellison et al. 2006; Bargh et al., 2002). For example Ellison et al.'s (2006) study on online dating shows that most participants seem to represent themselves fairly accurately in their profiles or while communicating with others. However, there seems to be a conflict between portraying a truthful and portraying a favorable depiction of themselves.

Bargh et al. (2002) suggest that at least for some people, the Internet might be a place where they can more freely express their *true self*. Anonymous interactions, hyperpersonal model and lack of usual social norms and barriers afford people to express their true self. In their study of college students Bargh et al. (2002) actually found that on the Internet, compared to face-to-face, people were both more likely to present their true self to their partners and were better able to be accepted by others,

when presenting their inner selves. Similarly, other researchers (Hardey, 2000; Bargh et al. 2002) suggest that the lack of cues online creates more true and intimate depictions and relationships. This is on par with the hyperpersonal model of communication, that suggest that people are more prone to reveal intimate facts about themselves online (Walther, 1996).

Exploring the idealized and true selves leaves us to ponder, which is the 'real self'? Can one's true self exist only on the web? As Turkle's anonymous interviewee states (1995: 179):

"... I Feel very different online. I am a lot more outgoing, less inhibited. I would say I feel more like myself. But that's a contradiction. I feel more like who I wish I was. I'm just hoping that face-to-face I can find a way to spend some time being the online me."

In his extensive study on possessions and self on the Internet age, Belk (2013) defines the identity on the age of Internet through the concept of sharing and the process of **co-construction of self**.

From Belk's (2013) point-of-view the hyperpersonal perspective, together with the dematerialized possessions show us how sharing our self is easier now than ever: digital tools enable us to share much more and much more broadly than before. Sharing anonymously means confessional behavior as well as sharing digital possessions like music or movies that used to be privately owned.

Co-construction of Self means that in constant digital gaze we fe affirm and construct our identity socially, not in solitude, constantly seeking and maybe gaining affirmation of others and building aggregate self through shared understanding of what is "our kind" of music, movies or look. Turkle (2011) has noted the same phenomena calling this the collaborative self.

6.4. Identity Transformation's Empowering Effects

To understand online disinhibition in Reddit, it is essential to understand empowerment, and the empowering effects identity transformation in the Online world can have. Let's first look at the definition of the concept of empowerment.

Although the concepts of empowerment was established several decades ago, it has no broadly accepted definition among researchers (Ackerson & Harrison, 2000). Still, it would seem that there exists a substantial conception of the term (Barak et al., 2008). With the help of Boehm and Staples (2002) and Staples (1990) Barak et al. (2008) define empowerment as

"Individuals perceived capabilities in coping with various challenges and overcoming obstacles"

The concept of empowerment emphasizes two things: *self-perception* and *anticipated outcomes*.

Thus, *sense of empowerment* describes a mental state of a person rather than an objective condition (Barak et al. 2008; Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2008). Add on to this by emphasizing the social aspect of empowerment: it is a concept that links person's strengths and competencies to the social and political environment in which he or she functions. This brings us to the original usage of empowerment: *it is a concept used when people in minorities overcome social, political and environmental barriers.*

Empowerment is also present in the research on identities on the age of Internet. Firstly, empowering effects can be found from *identity development*, meaning solving emotional issues of oneself through one's online identity (Turkle, 1995). Secondly, researchers have noted (Hamburger et al., 2008; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; McKenna et al., 2000) that Internet provides a significant venue for people with *marginalized identities*. Internet offers people the possibility to engage with other people of similar interest where it coin collection, political parties, nail polish usage or My Little Pony fan group. These marginalized identities can find similar others from online environment thus engaging in empowering experiences.

6.4.1. Identity Development and Empowerment

Let's first look at *identity development* on the age of Internet.

Turkle's (1995) research on MUD's encountered various MUD players who tried or were improving their real life selves through their MUD identities. Most of the interviewees were placing qualities to their MUD personae they couldn't successfully actualize in real life. For some, MUDs even became a place to solve their emotional issues.

For example, an interviewee of Turkle (1995) called Robert had to cope with severe disruptions in his personal life. His alcoholic father lost his job because of heavy drinking. Robert was also separated from his high school friends and mother because of moving to another city for college. For one year, Robert MUDded for an average of eighty hours a week taking a role of administrator and responsibilities of a full time job in his MUD.

For Robert, who had not been ever in charge of anything, his sudden responsibilities were enormous. But by helping others in the MUD Robert gave himself a sense of structure and control. The borderline addictive usage of the MUD even made Robert cope better with his father's alcoholism. In one interviewee he states:

"It made me feel differently about someone who was addicted. I was a different person on the MUD. I didn't want to be bothered when I was on the MUD about other things like work, school, or classes... I suppose in some way I feel closer to my dad. I don't think he can stop himself from drinking.."

After one year, Robert quit MUDding with newfound sympathy, openness and confidence.

Another case of Turkle (1995) studied was not so successful. Turkle's (1995) interviewee Stewart talked about his problems on the MUD endlessly to other people, essentially only playing MUDs to be able to spill out his guts to anyone listening- Still, Stewart felt that MUDs only made him addicted: *"The more I do it, the more I feel I need to do it."* Stewart stated on one occasion. In addition, Stewart took into his habit harassing other players and stating his moral superiority over them.

For Stewart, the MUD was a place to act out rather than work through his difficulties. According to Turkle (1995) Stewart's unsuccessfulness was due to the fact that he was not able to fuse his real life identity to his MUD identity. Turkle (1995) describes the process as follows:

"Stewart cannot learn from his character Achilles' experiences and social success because they are too different from things of which he believes himself capable. Despite his efforts to turn Achilles into Stewart, Stewart has split off his strengths and sees them as possible only for Achilles in the MUD."

In Turkle's study (1995) the most common aspect of identity people seemed to improve in MUDs was social anxiety: many interviewees declared themselves shy or introvert in RL compared to their MUD persona(e). Morahan-Martin & Schumacher (2003) have similar findings. In their study of collage students' Internet usage Morahan-Martin & Schumacher (2003) found that lonely individuals use the Internet more for emotional support and their social behavior is enhanced online: they are more likely to make friends online and receive satisfaction of these friendships. However, the Internet was also more likely to cause disturbances in the daily life of lonely individuals.

From these studies we might conclude that when a persons virtual identity develops capabilities, acceptance or emotional support the real life identity lacks, it can be highly beneficial for persons self-esteem and self-acceptance. However the virtual world can easily seem too alluring, especially for people who get support or social satisfaction in virtual life that they lack in real life,. This leads to addiction and disturbances in real life.

6.4.2. Stigmatized Identities and Empowerment

Another emotional problem that can or often is visible on the Net is individuals with *stigmatized part of their identity* (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). One of the most powerful studies on marginalized identities on the Internet is McKenna & Bargh's (1998) study on people with sexually or politically marginalized identities on newsgroups.

McKenna & Bargh (1998) theoreticize that expressing one's marginalized identity on the Internet is especially important to individuals who possess *stigmatized concealed identities*. In other words: peo-

ple who possess concealable stigmas. This is because people with concealed marginalized identities hear often negative opinions of their identity (since others don't know they possess it) and are unlikely to be recognized by others with similar identities. Under the anonymity and invisibility of Internet, these people can admit to having marginalized or non-mainstream tendencies -and find others who share these tendencies (McKenna et al. 2000).

McKenna & Bargh (1998) found that participating in newsgroups can transform individual's social identity: participating in communities with similar identities caused people to feel that this identity was more acceptable and reduced their inner conflicts. Perhaps the most significant finding of their study was, that participating in a newsgroup often caused people (37% sexually marginalized and 63% politically marginalized participants) to *reveal to their close family and friends their marginalized tendency*.

Also the experience can be highly useful even for those who didn't disclose their identity to their families. For example Pennebaker et al. (1990) has found that even anonymous confessions of concealed and shameful subjects can significantly reduce our health symptoms and stress: sometimes writing about the problem is enough. Thus, through participating in an Internet group that shares a marginalized aspect of oneself one can transform one's thinking to accept that part of self better.

Sharing one's identity online is highly important to self-esteem and self-acceptance: constantly hiding one's identity can cause high levels of stress and depression (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). McKenna & Bargh (1998). Support can be found from current research which shows that participating in online groups has been useful for example for following marginalized communities: immigrants (Komito, 2011), gays and lesbians, people with radical political views (McKenna & Bargh 1998), students suffering from loneliness (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003) and cancer patients (Robinson & Turner, 2003). Of course, it is to be remembered that Internet doesn't offer empowerment only in a positive sense: self-acceptance is promoted in hate and violence oriented groups as well (Hamburger et al., 2008).

I would argue that these experiences researched by McKenna & Bargh (1998) and McKenna et al. (2000) could also be described as empowering: online people can find other people with similar identities thus giving them newfound acceptance for their more marginalized qualities, both in good and in bad.

6.5. Conclusions

In conclusion, our perception of self and identity has broadened on the age of Internet. We are no longer limited to our physical bodies or possessions, but we exist also in the digital realm (Belk, 2013). Identity also plays significant role in virtual communities. However the sparseness of cues, an-

onymity and immateriality cause the identity on virtual communities be separate and different from our RL identities (e.g. Donath, 1998)

Still, identity we have on the Internet can be significant in a multitude of ways. It can offer a playground for a multitude of identities (Turkle, 1995) a venue for revealing ones stigmatized identity (McKenna & Bargh, 1998) or in other ways meaningful for the individual. Sometimes the experiences individual has online even lead to life-changing experiences, especially in the form of empowerment and identity transformation (Turkle, 1995; McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

7. Research Methodology

7.1. Research Paradigm

This research relies on **constructivist paradigm**. In terms of ontology, there is not one, objective truth of our world, but rather the truth is subjective: it depends on the observer. In terms of epistemology, my research assumes that we construct our subjective realities - our knowledge through experiences and reflecting those experiences with ourselves and with others. (Guba & Lincoln, 1994)

My study participates in multiple discourses.:1) computers as mediators of communications 2) the Internet and changing modes of thinking 3) understanding virtual communities 4) discourse on online disinhibition effect and 5) identity on the age of Internet & empowerment. Through these fragmented themes I aim to cast light to: 1) how the virtual community of Reddit affects to what we express outside, 2) How these expressions affect what we perceive inside and 3) how the virtual community of Reddits molds our cognitions through these expressions and perceptions. In terms of research fields, I borrow ideas from social psychology and communications studies, albeit still contributing the field of consumer research. Let's now look at how the constructivistic paradigm can be justified in the different multiple discourses and the perspective I take on each of these discourses.

My study takes part on the discourse on *computers as mediators of communication*. One might be tempted to think that because the discourse on CMC is highly related on language, it is actually part of the **social constructivism paradigm** meaning that the world is socially constructed through language and shared meanings (Kim, 2001). However, my approach to CMC is, that I aim to to make sense of how computers affect to what we express outside *just to understand how they effect what we perceive inside*. Thus, even though I utilize the CMC studies, I aim to look at them in from the perspective of how the experiences individuals have in communications reflect on how they may choose to act or feel in the future. However, my studies do contribute to the subject of culture, context and social cognitions, which I feel are in the end inseparable from our outer self.

In studying *the Internet and changing modes of thinking* I lean highly on Granic & Lamey's (2002) work. From their perceptions I build a picture of how our changing context is actually changing how we think and see the world. Thus, these findings support the constructivist paradigm: our reality is shaped by our observations.

Even *the virtual community* itself is socially constructed concept that means different things to different people and societies (Komito, 1998). In my research, the perception of the community of Reddit is constantly negotiated by redditors collectively - and still the perceptions vary in how each of the redditors perceive the community. Thus, my point of view for virtual communities relies on the constructivist paradigm, I study these communities with the concept is constantly negotiated and

re-negotiated by the community members and how we experience the same community is highly subjective.

In terms of the discourse on *online disinhibition* and *identity* my research borrows from the field of **psychology**. In terms of psychology, I base my study on the **social psychology**. Social psychology, is the field studied by Zimbardo (1970) and Reicher (1982) as well as McKenna & Bargh (2000) and it's focused on how people's thoughts, feelings and behavior are impacted by the imagined or real presence of others. The online disinhibition and the field of social psychology are closely related to the concept of identity and self. Social psychology is often described as being the bridge between psychology and sociology (Sewell, 1989). Thus, it is especially fruitful perspective for my research, which is sort of crossroad between psychology of communications and consumer culture studies.

The prevailing psychological outlook on self is, that the conception self is closely related to the conception of social identity. Thus, our perception of self formed largely in relation to others. In addition, maintaining or raising our self-esteem is a large motivator in social sciences. (Sedikides et. al, 2011). The issues of self and self perception are largely discussed also by Suler (2004) in the context of online disinhibition.

In other words: the conception of self and identity is important motivator in online disinhibition, at least when we look at the phenomena from the field of social psychology. Thus, my study borrows largely from the field of social psychology. My point of view on the *identity and self on the age of Internet* follows Turkle's (1994, 2006) lead in perceiving that the age of the Internet makes us constantly renegotiate our identity and values through avatars, mobile technology - and participation to virtual communities. Thus in the field of social psychology, I also highly lean on the constructivistic paradigm. Our (virtual) reality is mutually negotiated between people,

The constructivistic paradigm forms the core of my findings. I aim to understand how context of Reddit molds our way of thinking. This leads to changes in our inner cognitions including our cognition of the community and its' values – and in a deeper level our perception of self and identity. I see online disinhibition effect as something each individual experiences uniquely - the same context affects different people in a myriad of ways.

I think this is chosen approach is fruitful in understanding the disinhibition effect as stemming from how we make sense of the world through our experiences. On the other hand it also underlines that online disinhibition is something that manifests itself completely differently in different people. Both benign and toxic disinhibition stems from the same context leading to vastly different conclusions.

It is important to note that as this research is qualitative and relying on constructivist paradigm, the findings of this research are not objective. Rather the findings are negotiated between the me and the redditors I study and our separate constructions of reality. Thus, what I gain from being able to more

deeply understand the varying sense-making of experiences, I loose in being lost to those experiences: I cannot make generalizations of online disinhibition, I can only try and make sense of it through my own, subjective point-of-view.

7.2. Research Methodology

My research method is qualitative meaning that it concentrates on human feelings, thoughts, meanings and impressions rather than numerical data and its' analysis (Bellenger, Bernhardt & Goldstucker, 1976).

In the context of constructivist paradigm and qualitative market research I lean towards the **interpretive, empirical research** branch as introduced by Spiggle (1994) rather than the semiotic, structural, hermeneutic and literary analyses. As stated in the previous chapter, I do not concentrate on the joint creation of meanings or how they are formed through language. Rather, my aim is to create a contextually rich description of the online disinhibition effect in the virtual community of Reddit using analysis and interpretation to gain a deep-rooted understanding on how the site members experience belonging and acting in the virtual community of Reddit. My research goal was to understand:

How does the online disinhibition effect manifest itself in the context of the virtual community of Reddit?

It can be divided to three sub questions:

1. *How can we characterize the online disinhibition effect in Reddit?*
2. *What are the psychological mechanisms that enable the online disinhibition effect in Reddit?*
3. *What are the inner motivations behind acting disinhibited in Reddit? (As in what are the expected cognitive changes the redditors are after when engaging in disinhibited behavior)*

To study this, I turned to **netnography**: an unobtrusive and fast way to ethnographically study the cultures and communities emerging from CMC (Kozinets, 2002). As a research method, netnography places me more firmly into the field of consumer research, where it is a common method - as opposed to psychology. Let's look at this research method closer.

Netnography was first introduced by Kozinets (1997) on a study on the X-philes subculture of consumption. On a basic level, netnography is ethnography on communities that emerge from CMC (Kozinets, 1998). Further, Kozinets (1998) defines netnography as being qualitative research that

aims to enable a contextual study of consumer behavior in virtual communities. As defined by Kozinets (1998) netnography method means both, participation and observation in the culture or community being studied.

Reddit is a “pure” virtual community as defined by Kozinets (1998) and Turkle (1995), meaning that Reddit doesn’t exist IRL. It can be argued that to study the experience that is Reddit, the use of netnography is the most appropriate methodology as it can cover the whole experience and the entire social context of Reddit (Kozinets, 1998).

Furthermore, as I’ve been an active and passive Reddit user for years, netnography was a natural outcome to utilize my experiences on the site as holistically as possible. Since my study is more focused on the psychological perspective, not the cultural one, of Reddit, it could be argued that I should have chosen another method of study. However, since Reddit has such a vast array of material, I felt netnography was adequate also in tapping into the inner cognitions of the site users - even though many of the users do not choose to detail their inner thoughts and feelings -some still do. In addition, turning into netnography helped me to explore how the community culture and personal cognitions intersect.

In my study of Reddit there is a strong emphasis on the immersive participation to the community and finding a *thick description* (Geertz, 1973) meaning that I aim to explain the experience that is the virtual community of Reddit in a way that is meaningful to a non-redditor. Furthermore, I aim to richly describe the different manifestations of online disinhibition and the way various redditors seem to experience these expressions.

7.3. Data Collection

I have been participating to Reddit for around five years, mainly *lurking*. This means that I don’t post much content but I read it and vote on it. In addition to the knowledge I have acquired from Reddit from years of using it, I monitored the website closely for a period of one year. During this period I used the online tool delicious to save comments, comment threads and submissions from Reddit to serve as my data archive. In addition to the text (and sometimes picture or link) content found on Reddit I also did some **field notes** to detail the experience and feelings I experienced browsing the site. My research also includes data and conversations from Reddit outside the one year period, mainly in form of some of the most famous events that can be counted as part of the Reddit history.

My data collection was mainly focused on the so-called default subreddits: meaning all the subreddit’s that show when an unsubscribed user views the site or a subscribed user doesn’t change the subscription setting. The default subreddits were actually updated on May 7th on 2014, but I continued the study on the subreddits that were default when I started my research on January 2014:

- /r/adviceanimals
- /r/AskReddit (ask anything from redditors)
- /r/aww
- /r/bestof
- /r/books
- /r/earthporn
- /r/explainlikeimfive (ask a question, receive a simplified explanation)
- /r/funny
- /r/gaming
- /r/gifs
- /r/IAmA
- /r/movies
- /r/music
- /r/news
- /r/pics
- /r/science
- /r/technology
- /r/television
- /r/todayilearned (small random facts)
- /r/videos
- /r/worldnews
- /r/wtf

In addition to these I also visited smaller "metasubreddits" focused on gathering information from reddit, including /r/theoryoffreddit: *"a mildly navel-gazing space for inquiring into what makes Reddit communities work and what we in a community can do to help make it better"* and /r/museumoffreddit *"a subreddit dedicated to cataloging the posts and comments that will go down in Reddit history."*

In addition to the user-created content of Reddit I also used some sites focused on monitoring reddit. For example, for tracking and finding subreddits I used metareddit.com as well as redditlist.com.

As with grounded theory, (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) my data collection continued as long as I felt I could benefit from new data. My research process was **highly iterative**: I created and upgraded the research questions and my areas of interest as I progressed in my research. I went fluidly back and forth between the different phases of data collection and analysis (Spiggle, 1994).

7.4. Data Analysis

In my data analysis I used **categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalisation** and **integration** to create a model exploring the hows and whys of the online disinhibition effect in Reddit. (Spiggle, 1994; Kozinets, 1997)

Categorization, refers to classifying and labeling the different data e.g. the displays of online disinhibition in Reddit. Abstraction refers to developing these categories further, from simple slots to more complex concepts. In comparison, I compared the differences and similarities in my data. In dimensionalisation, I explored the dimensions of these categories further. In integration, perhaps the most important of my analysis techniques I built a theory based on my previous analysis, mapping down the relationships of my concepts. Some qualitative consumer researchers have shied away from creating a conceptual map, and contenting for identifying patterns, themes, or a few unrelated propositions. I believe in Spiggle's (1994) notion that "*categorization, abstraction, comparison, and integration are the fundamental, basic analytical operations. They enable the construction of a coherent conceptual framework or explanation.*" (Spiggle, 1994)

Thus, even though my research methods were qualitative and interpretive I still set on a course to find a conceptual framework for the online disinhibition effect in the context of the virtual community of Reddit. It must be noted that this framework is highly explorative and suggestion of all the ways online disinhibition effect might affect our cognition and perception. Quantitative research would be needed in order to study the validity and reliability of this model.

8. Reddit as a Virtual Community

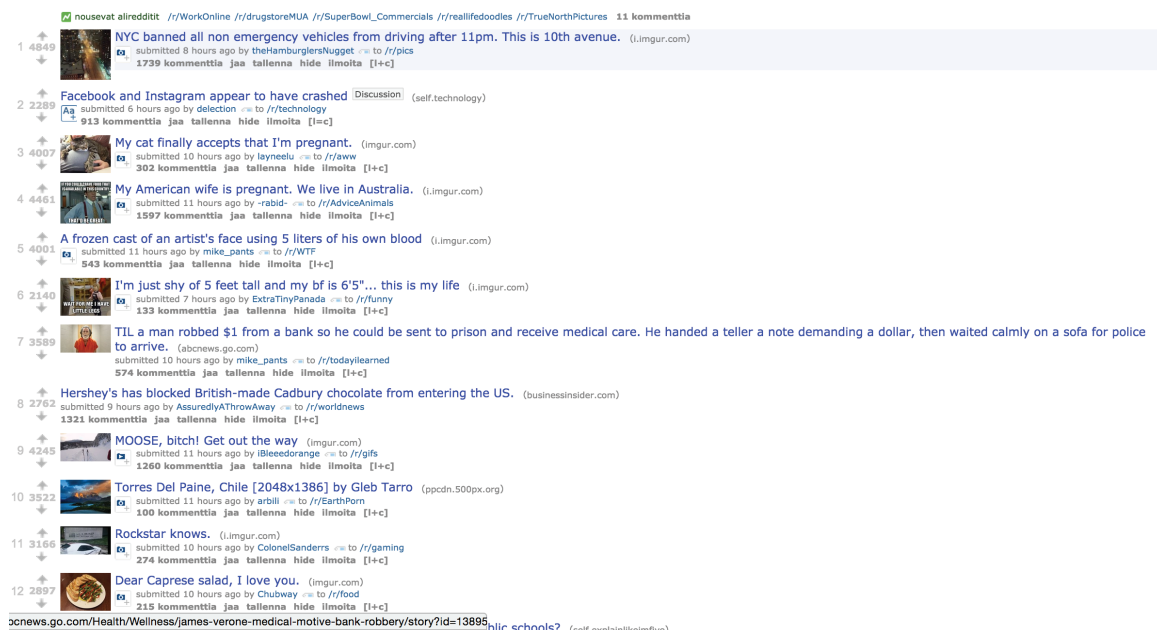
8.1. Overview

Reddit as a website is bulleting board system collecting the entries of its' users. Only registered community members can submit content, such as text or direct links. The same users can then vote submissions "up" or "down" to determine their position on the site's pages.

Founded in 2005 (Alden, 2014), the vastly popular site contains a collection of submissions including news, entertainment, stories, images, information and much more. On September 6th of 2015 Reddit had over two hundred million unique visitors from over two hundred different countries viewing a over five billion pages in a duration of a month. In addition Reddit had over 3 million logged in redditors casting over 22 million votes (<http://www.reddit.com/about/>, retrieved 6.09.2015). The amount of posts and unique users has earned Reddit the apt slogan *"frontpage of the Internet."*

At its' core Reddit website is a collection of recent text, links, videos and pictures (referred to as 'posts') submitted by its' users, organized by their popularity amongst other users. The algorithm that defines the order of the posts in Reddit front page uses **recent popularity** as an organization method, this ensures that the content of Reddit is always changing.

Browsing Reddit, you will generally see a site that looks like this:



Reddit.com on 27.01.2015, 14:52 on my own account logged in

Each text is a link to picture or a website, or just a text story. Browsing Reddit you can open each interesting-seeming link and see what they contain. If you decide what you see is funny, you can upvote it from the up arrow in the left, if you don't like it, you can downvote it from the down arrow in the same place. The number between the up and down arrows tells the score of the post, meaning the upvotes minus the downvotes the post has received. Under every post you can see the comments-section: by clicking it, you'll end up in the comments for that particular picture.

In this chapter I will offer you a brief outlook on “the frontpage of the Internet.” Through understanding what it is to be part of the community and how people share and communicate in Reddit, we can begin to understand the online disinhibition effect and how it manifests itself in the community's culture. First, I will characterize the content and content organization in Reddit, then I will explain how one can participate to the site. Lastly, I will offer a quick recap on what are the community's most prominent features.

8.2. Content in Reddit

The Reddit community is highly centered around content creation. Chiu et al. (2006) describe member-generated content as the backbone and definer of virtual community above all else. This finding is definitely something that resonates with Reddit: essentially Reddit *is* its content. The content is all that makes up the frontpage, the comment sections and the users.

The content submitted to Reddit is not only *original content (OC)* created by users themselves but at large, already existing news, videos, articles etc. which are only shared to others by users of Reddit. In addition to sharing, creating and consuming content, the voting system at place in Reddit means that the community collectively decides which content has earned visibility on the page and which hasn't.

To describe the nature and variability of the content in Reddit in a concrete way, I have created a small model describing the format and topic of most Reddit's content.

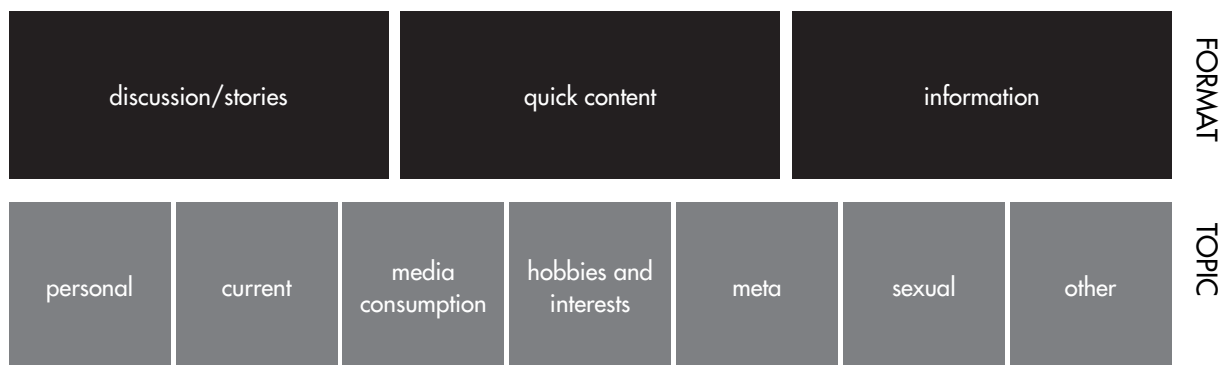


Figure 1. The content of Reddit categorized

In this model, the content in Reddit is organized using two different categorization methods: *the content format* and the *content topic*. All, or at least almost all Reddit content can be categorized to one of these three formats: discussion/stories, quick content or information. Next I'm going to explain the differences of these formats.

Information means all content that aims to deliver information for the users: whether it is news, relationship advice or just facts. Examples of informatory post in Reddit are:

"Malaysian PM: "Flight MH370 ended in the southern Indian Ocean"
 (/u/canausernamebetoolon, Reddit front page 24.03.2014 /, /r/worldnews)

"How Mark Twain became Mark Twain: The amazing story of the lectures that made him a superstar"
 (/u/username4000, Reddit front page 24.03.2014 /r/books)

Discussion/stories means all content which is mostly based on personal anecdotes. Sometimes the discussion is more fact-based, like in r/science where references are required and people are tagged according to their area of expertise, while other times the discussion is open for everyone and everything like in r/askreddit. An example of a discussion post would be:

"What took you way too long in life to figure out?"
 (/u/ddash, Reddit front page 24.03.2014, /r/AskReddit)

Quick/content in Reddit means most often memes, pictures, videos and gifs: all kinds of media content that is quick to look at, with no deeper meaning. Usually this content is humorous. Examples of quick content are pictures like these two:



"Angry Hitler Goldfish"

(/u/slomas, Reddit 2nd page 24.03.2014 /, /r/AdviceAnimals)

The content can also be organized through topics or themes of the content: I have found six main themes for the content in Reddit: personal, current, media consumption, hobbies, meta and sexual content. I have also included the "other" category to describe the content in Reddit that doesn't fit in any of these categories. A lot of the topics or themes in can be recognized through subreddits, which are mostly dedicated to a specific topic.

The first topic category, **personal**, means all posts or subreddits dedicated to mainly personal stories, problems, questions and experiences. For example /r/todayilearned is a subreddit dedicated to personal topics with informational format, while /r/askreddit often hosts personal content with discus-sional format.

The topic second category, **current**, refers to all subreddits and posts dedicated for current informa-tion, stories etc. For example /r/worldnews is mainly focused on current and new information. There is also a lot of subreddits that are most active when their topic is current, like /r/olympics.

Media consumption and **hobbies and interests** lists all subreddits dedicated to redditors interests and hobbies. Since the most popular hobbies of redditors are linked to media consumption I have raised that as a topic of their own. Examples of media consumption and hobby subreddits include /r/makeupaddiction, /r/fitness, /r/trees, (subreddit for marijuana smokers) /r/books and /r/movies. Hobbies and interests can also be connected for example to peoples work /r/talesfromtechsupport is a subreddit filled with stories from frustrated workers of technical support.

The meta content in Reddit is something that is referencing to Reddit or pop culture. The subreddit dedicated to listing the best comments in Reddit, /r/bestof is the only default subreddit in dedicated this category. In addition to /r/bestof, there are also many other serious meta-subreddits like /r/mu-

seumofreddit or /r/theoryofreddit. The meta content also includes a vast number of novelty and joke subreddits, like /r/onetruegod: a subreddit dedicated to an Reddit inside joke about Nicholas Cage.

This being the Internet, **sexual content** is also big part of Reddit. The most popular example of a subreddit dedicated to sexual content is /r/gonewild, a subreddit dedicated to redditors posting naked pictures of themselves.

The "other" category includes subreddits which are dedicated to everything else not listed here. Most of that content is mainly defined not by the category but rather by the format like /r/gifs or /r/pics. There are also some subreddits dedicated to some very specific content, which is usually "quick": like /r/birdswitharms a subreddit for pictures of birds with human arms or /r/invisiblebicycles for people riding bicycles with the bicycle photoshopped off.

All of the different formats and topics used in my model can also be overlapping and /r/today-ilearned post can be quick and informative in content and a post about a popular TV series can be both meta and media-consumption themed.

What we can learn from this characterization is that Reddit is above all vast and taboo-free in its content: whether it's funny, dead serious or illegal - it can be found in Reddit.

8.3. The Subreddit System as an Organization Method

All the content in Reddit is organized through system called **subreddits**. The subreddit system means, that each post and comment on Reddit is posted on its' own subreddit community focused on a certain subject. Each subreddit has an unique name, and they can be found by typing Reddit.com/r/subreddit name.

The range of different subreddits is huge: there are subreddits for vast subjects such as /r/twoxchromosomes for all women of Reddit or extremely tiny subjects like /r/birdswitharms: a subreddit dedicated solely to photoshopped pictures of birds with human arms. All subreddits have their own **moderators**: people who have the power to delete content and ban users.

The exact amount of active subreddits is not known, however the site metareddit.com keeps track of 385,868 subreddits as of march 16th (metareddit.com/16.03.2014). However, only 6 026 of these subreddits were active (five or more posts a day) on march 15th. (<http://www.reddit.com/about/>).

Each registered user can subscribe to an unique set of their subreddits of choice, by browsing the subreddits on Reddit and clicking subscribe button next to the subreddits name. So, Reddit doesn't offer the same content for everyone. When the user wants to customize his Reddit he can subscribe

and unsubscribe from the subreddits in order to change his front page. Every user can choose their unique front page from the huge pool of subreddits.

If we look at the subreddit system from the perspective of what it tells us about Reddit, we should first turn to Bagozzi & Dholakia (2002). According to Bagozzi & Dholakia (2002) most virtual communities are based on a **specific common interest**. As we can see, compared to the characterization of Bagozzi & Dholakia (2002) the Reddit community is a bit different. By understanding the subreddit system we can learn that Reddit is actually similarly *one huge virtual community dedicated to everything, and hundred thousand small virtual communities dedicated to something very specific*. As reddit shares one common culture and morals, at least to an extent - so do all of the different subreddits.

8.4. Participating to the Reddit Community

Reddit has a huge userbase of 174 million unique visitors every month (<http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/reddit-stats/>). To vote, comment and create content in Reddit, which can be seen as becoming a redditor, you will need a Reddit account. Establishing a reddit account requires two things:

- unique username
- functioning email address

Thus Reddit fosters pseudonymity. In addition these requirements are not exactly hard to fill. To become a redditor, one only needs few seconds time to register. This characteristic is very much defining the Reddit environment, which is infinitely fluid. Even in daily basis one of the popular Reddit “phrases” or memes goes “That’s enough Internet for today”, emphasizing how easy it is to exit and re-enter the community on your own time.

There are three ways to actively participate in Reddit:

- voting
- commenting on other people’s content
- submitting your own content

In addition, one can passively participate in Reddit by *consuming its’ content*.

As we have learned earlier, many researchers characterize participating in virtual communities as **creating and consuming content**. (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Butler et al. 2007). Similarly, the community of Reddit is deeply ingrained to its’ content. For me as a Redditor, “redditing” is mainly con-

suming the site's content and Reddit is equal to its' content. When discussing with my IRL redditors about the site, the conversations mainly start with "did you see ... in Reddit" - not for example "Do you know..." or "Did you ask...". Of course, the content is created by the site's users, but unlike on facebook for example, on Reddit the content is much more important than the person.

This being said, in Reddit there exists one more vital way of participation that really sets the community apart: voting. What keeps Reddit's hugely vast content interesting is the algorithm and users who organize the content so that what most find interesting can be easily found.

Thus, participating in the virtual community of Reddit can be characterized by **creating, consuming and grading content**.

8.5. Conclusions

To quickly recap, Reddit as a virtual community has few specific features.

Firtsly, Reddit is *highly diverse*: instead of one specific interest it has a community for basically every specific interest there is. This is made possible by Reddit's unusually high userbase. Reddit one virtual community in which exists a multitude of small virtual communities. The nature of the content in the Reddit community can be characterized *as diverse and taboo-free*: there's not a subject too taboo or too silly to be discussed in Reddit. The content and participation in Reddit is also *highly fluid*: the frontpage is constantly changing and new posts are emerging by the second, similarly you can become a redditor in a matter of seconds and exit and enter the site at your will.

Secondly, participating in Reddit consist of not two, but three main practices: *creating, consuming and grading content*. Where the earlier communities like Usenet were all about submission recency, in Reddit all content is also constantly collectively graded.

9. Online Disinhibition Effect in Reddit

9.1. Overview

Online disinhibition is something that manifests itself in the content of Reddit constantly. Whether it is confessional and intimate details of one's life, or crude, racist or misogynist jokes - Reddit has it. In fact, the displays of disinhibition are so ingrained part of the Reddit communications culture that many redditors report that they have been desensitized: nothing but very crude jokes might make one laugh or nothing 'surprises' or 'shocks' one anymore.

In this chapter, I aim to describe how the online disinhibition effect manifests itself in the virtual community of Reddit. I'll start by looking back at the theoretical foundations of the discourse on online disinhibition. Then, I will dig deeper into the online disinhibition in Reddit through discussing two prominent types: confessions & intimacy and toxic remarks & deception. In this chapter, I will aim to 1) give you a holistic picture of how do these two types of disinhibition manifest themselves in Reddit 2) what are the motivations behind engaging in the each type of disinhibition. Through understanding the motivations of online disinhibition for the individual, we can move on to discuss the underlying cognitions behind these motivations.

9.2. Characterizing the Online Disinhibition in Reddit

As defined by Suler (2004), who first introduced the term online disinhibition effect describes *the intensive acts of self-disclosure or acting out prominent in the online behavior*.

Suler (2004) likes to categorize the online disinhibition effect into two types: *benign disinhibition* meaning sharing personal emotions, fears and wishes as well as showing unusual acts of kindness and *toxic disinhibition* meaning rude language, harsh criticism, threats and anger.

On the other hand Walther (1996) divides the CMC communications to three categories. *Impersonal interaction* refers to the task-oriented nature of CMC. *Interpersonal CMC perspective* refers to the regular personal type of CMC communication and *hyperpersonal perspective* refers to when CMC surpasses the level of affection and emotion of parallel FtF communication.

Thus, while Suler's (2004) categorizations moves more on the axis of emphatic-unemphatic, thus reflection on how you communicate in relation to others, Walther (1996) considers the online disinhibition effect in relation to your self: whether you are revealing a lot or a little for yourself.

When describing the online disinhibition in the context of Reddit, I felt inclined to use two axis-

es: one for one’s empathy level, another on whether the act of disclosure is targeted towards yourself (e.g. confession) or towards others (e.g. praise or telling-off). When I looked at this idea further, I felt that it would seem, that what we most prominently understand as online disinhibition is either being “empathetic” towards yourself or unemphatic towards others. This of course also explains the two competing views of the online disinhibition effect: the same kind of disinhibition can be characterized through our outer expressions or inner experiences. It must be noted, that I think that in the outlines of online disinhibition: for example being emphatic outwards, lies interesting field of study. However, in this I decided to focus just on the two most prominent forms of online disinhibition in Reddit, which I named:

1. Confessions and intimacy
2. Toxic remarks and deception

These two levels can also be placed on this following chart:

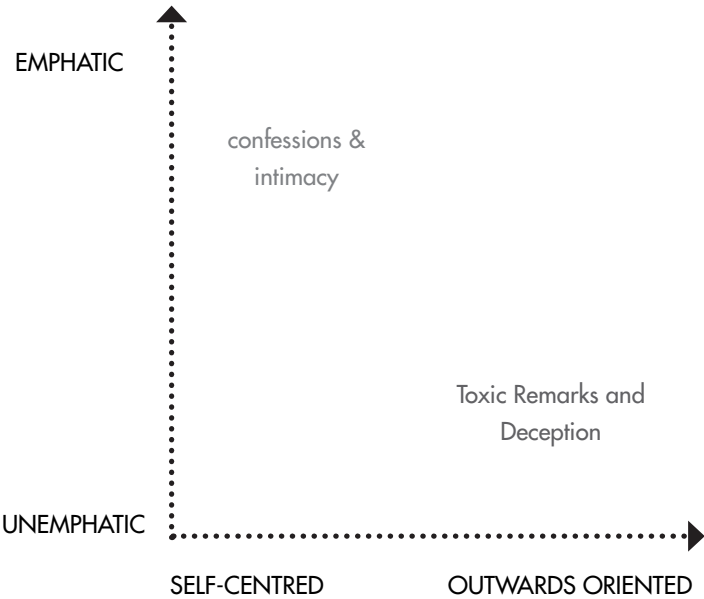


Figure 2. Online disinhibition effect in the context of Reddit

Confessions and intimacy describes two, closely intertwined concepts of disinhibition: confessional behavior and the feeling of intimacy or closeness. Toxic remarks and deception, describes not only the harmful comments, but also deceptive behavior. I decided to include deception to the spectrum of toxic online disinhibition, since I felt that dishonesty often goes hand in hand with inflammatory posts.

In the following chapters I will describe the online disinhibition in Reddit further, using excerpts from the site.

9.3. Confessions & Intimacy

First time telling anyone this. This thread is so deep that probably no one will see, but if one person does see it, ill feel better. I am basically living a lie. I told my entire family I was able to transfer out of community college and into a university, but I never finished up the requirements. So since I live at home, every day instead of going to school I go to the local library and bs. My lies are so extensive, I even go to the campus and meet my girlfriend for lunch sometimes. I've made fake transcripts to show my family, and to make it look like I'm actually studying I go to MIT opencourseware to look up facts that I "learned in class" that day. I have become a remarkable liar. I hope to be transferring in the fall and then I look forward to living a normal life. Coming clean is not an option at this point.

/u/ iamaliar22 , 17.08.2014

The post above is one of the most popular askreddit threads of all time, titled *"Throwaway time! What's your secret that could literally ruin your life if it came out?"*. It's one of the numerous confessions detailed in the thread, ranging from taboo or illegal topics including abuse, deception, drug use, illegal activities, incest, mental illness to funny childhood stories. No matter what the topic, all these post share in common the fact the that the person hasn't been able to share with anyone else in their life. As /u/iamaliar22 states *"First time telling anyone this."*

Although the thread is extreme example, the sharing of hidden feeling, thoughts or behavior is something that is very prominent in the confessional and intimate behavior in Reddit. Many users are able to share things normally latent in their RL identities. The reason vary. Sometimes the redditors are hiding their secrets due to their taboo nature, sometimes due to lack of close social relationships in life, sometimes due to not having the ability to cope with others reactions. For example, one user states: *"I'm the kind of person who deals with problems on her own, so if this stuff got out I wouldn't be able to face anyone who tried to comfort me."*

When looking at the motivations for sharing their intimate life details, I was able to dissect five different motivations for the disinhibited behavior: 1) venting 2) finding emotional support 3) finding similar others 4) finding advice 5) compensation for lack of cues.

The first motivation behind online disinhibition is the most common. Often just 'getting it of my chest' is often enough to bring some relief to the confessor. To /u/imaliar22 the above redditor, it is enough even if only one other person reads the post. Some redditors are not even looking for advice or support and might state things like: *"I don't need an intervention, I just need to vent."* There even exists a subreddit called r/offmychest dedicated to confessional stories people need to get off their chest.

Some redditors are seeking even more help to their problems. Generally they seek this help through advice, social support as well as finding similar others. Various subreddits exist solely based on giving

advice, finding social support or finding similar others. Examples of these subreddits including r/relationships, dedicated mainly to people with problems in their relationships, /r/raisedbynarcissists, dedicated to people with narcissistic parent(s) or /r/loseit, dedicated to the weight loss journeys of individuals.

Emotional support is offered in almost all conversations on intimate topics. For example, a redditor posting his feelings after the sudden loss of her girlfriend was so touched by the emotional support that he stated: “*First thank you everyone for your kind words and great advice. The last few days have been hell but I know that Alex would’ve wanted me to be happy. Thanks again, it really means alot.*”

Finding similar others is prominent in various intimate conversations. Mostly, it is concentrated on subreddits dedicated to people in similar situations, such as /r/raisedbynarcissists, a depressing read with each post being about more incredulous unfairness and mistreatment than the last. In the subreddit, many users report relief for not being alone in their quite unique situation.

In terms of *advice seeking*, when it is connected to online disinhibition, the advice seeking is highly connected to understanding the situation better and being able to place our self in the situation correctly. For example, this can be through receiving reassurance that one’s spouse is mistreating them - or in the other hand - whistleblowing on their own behavior. For example, the typical poster of /r/relationships might have a fight with their spouse. They come to /r/relationships not only to ask advice to coping with this discussion but also to seek other perspectives on how the situation is.

If we look back at the thread on the deepest and darkest secrets we started with, similar motivations arise. Many original commenters report in later edits that they feel emotional relief from receiving support or finding similar other in comments like these: “*Thank you to everyone who has sent positivity my way over the past year or so!*”, or “*Keep reading about people who knowingly slept with relatives they grew up with... is it bad that I feel slightly less horrible?*”

In addition to these four reasons, sometimes redditors also seem to compensate or overcompensate for the lack of cues prominent online. To make your story more touching and relatable with just words, one has to sometimes compensate with use of more intimate and lively language that one would when having all the cues available and at use.

An important perspective on the intimate and confessional behavior is, that sometimes the emotional support, finding similar others or advice can lead to further action. As one post from a redditor feeling guilty of how she behaved in childhood with her blind brother explains:

“...Update. I immediately called my brother after posting this and caught him while he was walking to a study group. I told him about my guilt and he laughed. He understands how frustrating it must have been. He told me that all of the good things I have done as a sister completely overshadow any-

thing bad I did and that he loves me more than anything. I'm glad I spoke with him and I encourage others on here to talk to someone if they can."

9.4. Toxic Remarks & Deception

"...Some redditors doxxed me through my twitter and facebook accounts. I received creepy messages and death threats; someone actually sent me a message saying that they hoped I would get cancer and die.

In the end, it all worked out ok though. No one killed me, I still don't have cancer (I hope), and the receipt got nearly 2 million views (partly because of the controversy). I called to apologize to the Olive Garden branch, and they told me it was the greatest thing that ever happened to them and that corporate had personally called to congratulate them on doing the right thing. I got my 15 minutes of fame; it was an extremely exciting day, but hot damn can some redditors be extremely judgmental and terrible people.

/u/Tanek, 26.12.2014

In the upper story redditor /u/Tanek faced death threads, accusations of deception and harassment over posting an Olive Garden receipt. In the receipt it showed that /u/Tanek had gotten his bill refunded. According to /u/Tanek the refund was due to a friendly waiter sympathizing his story of recent house fire. However, Reddit took a more critical view and accused /u/TAnek of supposed marketing hoax made by the famous restaurant chain. This time the assumption was wrong and /u/Tanek ended up as the target of online harassment in false basis.

Even though the Reddit voting system ensures that most of the time the most crudely racist, bigoted or unkind comments as well as spams and flames are "downvoted to oblivion", toxic behavior still roams in Reddit. Especially prominent and dangerous type of toxic behaviour on the site, is called doxxing: researching and broadcasting personally identifiable information on a person. This is exactly what /u/Tanek of our story had to endure. In doxxing nobody can downvote the content and thus the most toxic remarks research their target. In addition doxxing can be seriously meddle with the real life of the target.

Whereas the confessions, intimacy and emotional support Reddit offers is often in plain sight. The voting system causes the toxic behavior to often roams in a more personal level through personal messages in Reddit as well as even other channels, like the target person's Facebook and Twitter. The toxic behavior often has no limits, as /u/Tanek states: *"I received creepy messages and death threats; someone actually sent me a message saying that they hoped I would get cancer and die."*

On the other hand, /u/Tanek is not exactly understanding himself stating that redditors can be outright *'terrible people.'*

Another type of toxic behavior on Reddit is so called “trolling”, in which the poster posts purposefully insulting or otherwise reaction-inducing texts on the site (Donath, 1998). The purpose of these stories is usually just to disrupt the site. Because of its voting based system, trolling is not as prominent in Reddit as it is on some other bulletin board systems - and if done well, it can be even embraced.

One example of the former is when /r/newzealand decided collectively to embrace a person lashing out to Kiwis (New Zealanders). The following post gathered five Reddit gold, got stickied to the subreddit page and gathered numerous humorous confirmations:

Never have I seen such rude people in my life. You kiwis disgust me. Just hearing that word pisses me off. Kiwis are the worst humans on this planet. Here is why. First of all you can't speak properly this annoys me greatly. Can you weak minded beings not determine which letter is e and which is an i? Second of all kiwis are some of the rudest people on this planet. I once knew such a person, a kiwi. I avoided them at all costs and I didn't look at them. Why? Because they were very rude and disgusted me. They were ugly, stupid and annoying (like all kiwis). Don't come to any other country. We hate you, we hate the sound of your voice and we hate your existence. I can only hope that there's a massive earthquake (similar to the Christchurch one) only this time it kills all of the New Zealanders. They are the cancer of the Earth.

/u/Ameltdicecream, 22.01.2015

The over the top content and statements imply, that the writer is probably not very serious, and instead of being hurt by the post, the subscribers of the community answered with humorous and sarcastic comments like *“Why did you have to re-open old wounds, OP? Why?! Do you hate me so much?”* or *“A++ would get insulted again.”*

When looking at the reasons behind toxic behavior and deception online I could find four underlying motivations: 1) *venting* 2) *feelings of (moral) superiority* 3) *humor* and 4) *compensation for lack of cues.*

Just as with confessional behavior and intimacy, in toxic remarks the reason is often in venting. For example the existence of some of the most debatable subreddit /r/fatpeoplehate was defended by its existence as a channel to vent.

When we look at the case of /u/Tanek, it would seem that his bullies believed their cause to be *morally righteous*: in wishing /u/Tanek with cancer they were defending reddit as uncommercial and free community. Similar patterns arise in almost all cases in the world of toxic disinhibition in forms of insults, harassment and doxxing in Reddit. Whether it is because the person has wrong opinions or redditors

believe he has committed some sort of violation of their moral standards, doxxing, harassment and insults always stem from vigilantism. The bullies strongly feel they are doing the right thing.

Similarly, successful deception can cause the writer to feel morally or otherwise superior to others – by successfully fooling everyone else you can prove your superiority. For example /u/warphalange describes successfully faking cancer as:

“Why did you bother upvoting this? Is it because you wanted others to see what a D3 beta invite looks like? No. You did it because you are patronizing fucks. “Awww... he has cancer. I’ll give him upvotes.””

From u/warphalange’s post, it is clear that he sees himself as someone who is above others, and even more, he feels himself to be the hero of the story, pointing out fallacies in other people’s Reddit behavior through his post.

Another vastly different case of toxic behavior is trolling, which is often prompted by *humor*. As in the case of the over the top insults targeted to /r/kiwis, the post was probably never meant to be serious - it was meant as humor. Trolling can also be done with more malicious intent of disrupting the community – perhaps to vent one’s feelings. But even then it is not targeted to one single individual and it’s more of attention seeking than with seriously malignant intentions.

In general Reddit has a two-fold approach to toxic behavior and deception. On the other hand Reddit shuns harassment and personal threats: they are not encouraged or allowed on the site nor they are part of the moral code of the site. On the other hand, it is also expected of users not to react or get worked up by casual online debates or “trolls.” As a famous meme seen it Reddit sarcastically puts it:



As this meme expresses it’s everyday world of Reddit for someone who posts deceptive stories, gets insults over having “the wrong” opinion, or gets caught up in heated online debates. Only when doxxing is involved or the insults get completely out of hand are you supposed to get hurt or react.

Sometimes, redditors even downright ignore the truthfulness in favor of humor. A funny story is more important than a truthful one. To especially funny and juicy stories users can be found stat-

ing things “*This has got to be one of the best TIFUs ever posted, because it enters a realm where it doesn’t matter whether the story is real or fake.*”

Similarly to Donath’s (1998) findings on trolling and Usenet: on Reddit lying is not so frowned upon, *but bad lying is.*

9.5. Conclusions

All and all, online disinhibition effect is big part of what makes Reddit an unique and interesting community. Confessions & intimacy as well as toxic remarks and deception are part of the community’s daily life.

Confessions and intimacy can be characterized by being on subjects that the person cannot discuss or find support for in their RL. The reasons for why they cannot be discussed vary greatly: examples of possible reasons include a taboo subject, illegality, lack of close social relationships and inability to cope with immediate reactions.

The redditors who engage in intimacy and confessional behavior have four main motivations: venting, finding similar others, receiving emotional support and getting advice. As we can see three of these four reasons are connected with emotional relief, rather than concrete gains - And even in the case of finding advice, the underlying motivations can be highly emotional.

The voting-based Reddit platform discourages and prevents the most prominent types of toxic disinhibition we often see in non-voting based anonymous platforms. Thus, the most malignant content in Reddit operates on personal level - through toxxing and personal harassment. In addition, a successfully funny or deceptive stories can easily gain attention in the site.

The main motivations for toxic remarks and deception include: 1) vigilantism and feeling of moral superiority 2) humor Thus, often the toxic online disinhibition effect stems from believing that one is “doing the right thing” by defending one’s own opinion or morals even with harsh responses. Other times toxic online disinhibition stems simply from wanting to, for some reason or the other, entertain or get attention in the community.

The general community response for toxic remarks and deception is two-fold. On the other hand, trolling and toxic remarks in general are often expected, or even accepted behavior in Reddit. Everybody knows that online, you might face purposeful deception and bashing and you shouldn’t be offended by it. On the other hand, when the harassment gets serious and starts to effect one’s private life, it is generally shunned.

Lastly, in both forms of disinhibition compensation or overcompensation for the lack of cues and venting can be seen as the motivators. When expressing strong emotions with just words, we are inclined to use more extreme wordings to get our message across. In addition it would seem that many people use Reddit as their channel to release their emotions – were it through confessions or through toxic remarks or even deception.

10. The Online Disinhibition Mechanism in Reddit

10.1. Overview

Online disinhibition effect in the context of Reddit, can be characterized through a multitude of concepts and discourses concerning computer-mediated communications, virtual communities, age of Internet as well as identity on the age of Internet. In this chapter, I will aim to draw together the findings I introduced in the previous two chapters concerning the nature of the Reddit community and online disinhibition effect in Reddit. With the help of some concepts from literature review as well as by discussing the topics of disinhibition and the nature of the virtual community of Reddit deeper and in relation to each other I will form a preliminary model on the online disinhibition in the context of Reddit.

From my research, I was able to find the following attributes contributing and defining the online disinhibition effect in the context of the virtual community of Reddit:

1. *Dissociation from one's RL identity*
2. *Assuming new communications' culture*
3. *Assuming new ethics and values*
4. *Searching for empowering experiences*

Dissociation from IRL identity is largely due to one particular characteristics of the communication in virtual communities: pseudonymity (e.g. Turkle 1995; Donath, 1998). Due to the pseudonymous nature of Reddit, most users are able to reveal and act in a way they would not in real life. Furthermore I will argue that when redditors are freed from their RL identities, they assume new communications culture. The way of speaking is simply more disinhibited in the virtual community of Reddit than it is IRL. In addition, redditors also assume new ethics and values. In Reddit, it is more accepted to behave in a disinhibited way than IRL. These first three attributes built the actual and cognitive context, in which the redditor engaging in online disinhibition operates. They also answer the first two of my research questions:

1. *How can we characterize the online disinhibition effect in Reddit?*
2. *What are the psychological mechanisms that enable the online disinhibition effect in Reddit?*

These mechanisms only explain how Reddit enables to engage in disinhibited behavior. Digging deeper into the underlying psychological factors of online disinhibition, I'll argue that the reason for why people engage in online disinhibition is searching for empowering experiences, These empowering experiences can relieve stress, solve emotional issues and develop or change one's identity. This addresses my last research question:

3. *What are the inner motivations behind acting disinhibited in Reddit? (As in what are the expected cognitive changes the redditors are after when engaging in disinhibited behavior)*

Now let's look at each of these factors or stages in more detail.

10.2. Dissociation from One's RL identity

The dissociation from the redditor's RL identity is necessary for the redditor to be able to transition from his RL morals, ethics and communication culture to completely new morals, ethics and culture. In this chapter, I will describe how the anonymity and pseudonymity are prevalent on Reddit and how they enable a redditor to dissociate from his RL identity.

Redditors can be found describing the fact that someone IRL finding out your Reddit username as *"a clash between your personal life and virtual life"* or even stating *"Knowing someone's Reddit username is an unfair insight into their private life and mind."* This sort of "what happens in Reddit, stays in Reddit"-mentality is essential for the users. For many, Reddit is a safe haven in which they can share things they couldn't IRL.

I believe the enabler of this dissociation is mainly **pseudonymity**. As discussed before, pseudonymity is a common feature of virtual communities (Suler, 2004). Pseudonymity means that the community members have their own usernames or avatars which are –as opposed to our bodies and material possessions prevalent IRL (Belk, 198)– the only expression of identity available online. The pseudonym might be completely disconnected from person's real life identity, but they might have their own reputation and personality in the virtual world (Meyer, 1989).

Since commenting on Reddit requires an unique username and an email address, a comment can't be given completely anonymously, but it always exists associated with a certain username. Thus, Reddit also fosters pseudonymity. The Reddit user interface also supports the pseudonymity further by keeping track of each user's posts and comments. By clicking on any username a redditor can access another redditors commenting and posting history which display the pseudonym's reputation and personality.

Most redditors prefer a pseudonym, in which they share some intimate details of their life, but not

enough to be recognized IRL. Some even describe how they include untrue tidbits of their life within their comments to throw people of the trail in recognizing them in real life. Hence redditors foster their pseudonymity and want to keep the identity as a separate compartment compared to their real life identities. As stated before:

“Knowing someone’s Reddit username is an unfair insight into their private life and mind.”

Redditors foster their pseudonymous identities so much, that a confession can be too revealing even as associated to their pseudonym. This is when a redditor turns to a so called *throwaway account*. Throwaway account means making a completely new account just to make one, often especially embarrassing or inflammatory comment or post. Sometimes even complete threads filled with confessions made with a throwaway account are posted, with the prompt *“Throwaway time”* or something similar. Thus Reddit as a site actually fosters both, pseudonymity and anonymity.

The use of throwaways implies that some redditors still care about their pseudonymous identity, or as /u/AAL314 puts it *“People like to be liked, even on the internet and your main account is the closest thing to identity here.”*

In contrast to the full(ish) anonymity of a throwaway accounts, some redditor pseudonyms are also entirely inseparable from the real person. An example of inseparable Reddit account would be /u/GovSchwarzenegger, the account of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger is sometimes seen commenting especially on threads about politics or fitness. However, posts made by celebrity accounts or other recognized redditors are rarely, if ever, very disinhibited - thus it would seem that pseudonymity/anonymity is indeed an important part of the online disinhibition effect.

To your average redditor, the site offers an outlet to reveal more or different things about themselves than IRL. As /u/namasteneeko puts it:

“The anonymity of the Internet is a beautiful thing and allows us to express ourselves in ways that we might otherwise be too embarrassed or shunned to do...”

/u/namasteneeko, 01.11.2013

This same idea is also discussed in previous chapter on the topic of confessional behavior and intimacy - it would seem that this form of online disinhibition is very enabled by anonymity and pseudonymity - people tend to reveal themselves more disinhibitedly precisely on the topics they cannot IRL. On the other hand toxic remarks and deception are also enabled by anonymity. At worst these acts of disinhibition could be borderline or downright illegal in real life. At best, most people do not like to gamble whether people think their clever deception is funny or insulting.

To summarize through their pseudonyms and anonymous throwaway accounts, Redditors are able

to reveal and explore topics, feelings and ideas they would be embarrassed or shunned to explore in IRL. Thus, they're able to dissociate from their IRL identities and to express a side of their self normally hidden in IRL. *"On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog."*

On the other hand, I would argue that anonymity/pseudonymity is only the enabler of online disinhibition. To understand the issue more deeply, we need to look closer at the subject.

10.3. Assuming New Communications' Culture

Freed from their RL identity, redditors can act more disinhibitedly than they would in real life. In this chapter, I will go on to argue, that redditors are not roaming not roaming free of any constraints under their pseudonym or anonymity. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the pseudonym itself is still a sort of an identity. Even online, people still want to be liked, respected and supported. More so, the still want to feel like they *belong* somewhere.

In addition to enabling more disinhibited behavior by erasing the fears and social bounds we have in real life, the pseudonymity also enables something else in redditors. Through their pseudonym, redditors assume to a new culture connected to the virtual community of Reddit.

Let's first look at the more superficial of the two: the communications' culture of Reddit. On the virtual world the culture is simply different from RL. What you are allowed to say and how you are allowed to say it, as well as how you understand others is different. I would argue that partly online disinhibition effect is caused by the fact that the way of speaking is different online and IRL.

To understand the communications' culture of Reddit -, we need to understand the two features of CMC: **lack of cues** (Walther, 1996, 1997) and **text-basedness** (Postmes et al. 1998).

As discussed before, text is still the single most important method of communication on the Internet (Postmes et al. 1998). As stated *"Online, you share words"* (Henderson & Gilding, 2004). Similarly, in the world of Reddit communications, language is the most important tool one has to win an argument, gain karma points or in other ways receive social recognition from the site.

As we discussed in the chapter on online disinhibition, redditors tend to compensate for the lack of cues and text-basedness in their communications. When we cannot express ourselves in other forms than text a lot of emphasis is put on persons storytelling abilities, clever use of words, spelling and argumentation skills. The sites voting system courages disinhibition further, by people favoring colorful and expressive language –whether it is clever insults, moving confessions or effusive praise. After all, extremities often make a comment more interesting, touching or funnier. This makes redditors more inclined to write and give exposure to disinhibited comments than in real life, where over-praise or

colorful insults can be frowned upon.

Lack of cues is another difference in communication online and IRL (Walther, 1996). On the Internet you often do not know how your conversation partner looks like or sounds like. This also leads to little knowledge on what kind of shades of voice they use and what kind of expressions they make (Suler 2004).

As discussed in chapter on online disinhibition in Reddit, the communications culture is also shaped by language being the only tool to express one's emotions. There is no way to show your facial expressions or see emotions on others, unlike face-to-face communications, where you can show your disapproval even within praise. As one redditor puts it: *"Tone is something that isn't conveyed through text unless explicitly stated."*

Thus, on reddit rich and exaggerated language is the only tool with which to win people to your side, argue or express emotion - where it gratitude or disapproval. That is why /u/Tanek states *"hot damn can some redditors be extremely judgmental and terrible people"* - he has no other tools but language to express the flood of emotions and disapproval of their behavior. Similarly, perhaps statements considered as overstatements such as *"I was seriously not expecting the flood of love and support when I posted this."* (on praising comments about a handmade costume) are popular within the site.

Lack of cues and text-basedness have shaped and continue to shape the Reddit communications' culture to be more colorful, more exaggerated, more touching –and more disinhibited. Understanding that disinhibition is part of Reddit's communications culture is important. It implies that online disinhibition is more than just blind emotions targeted towards others. Online disinhibition is also part of complex, imaginative and emotional communications' culture.

10.4. Assuming New Ethics and Values

In addition to adopting new communications' culture, I believe that, when logging into the site, redditors also assume a different culture in a more deeper way. Reddit is not just a place where the way of speaking is different. Reddit is also a new culture, with it's own inner values and ethics. When redditors are engaging in disinhibited behavior, they can actually be conforming to group norms and ethics.

As discussed before Reddit as a community is highly diverse, fluid and taboo-free. This new kind of community, can be understood better through understanding how the Internet shapes our world view (Granic & Lamey, 2000). On the other hand, we should also understand how redditors share a social identity, consisting of self-awareness of membership, feeling of belongingness and collective self-esteem as described by Bagozzi (2000). It is also noteworthy to see how these factors shape Red-

dit - and I would argue - many other virtual communities, forming a whole new concept of communality.

Reddit is nothing like traditional communities that are usually bound by geographic borders, demographics or other factors. Being Finnish, a business student or even a part of the temporary community of being a visitor of a certain rock festival are always only partially volitional. My life choices, capabilities as well as my background tie me to these groups, and they consist of people I have something –or a lot– in common with: a language, a demographic, a taste in music. I cannot quit and restart being a business student everyday.

Reddit is very different: it's users have not much, if anything in common. You can come and go just as you like. You can even choose to be something you're not in real life. There is no commitment and very little hierarchy.

In the real world we live surrounded by many authorities through work, bureaucracy and law. However, in Reddit the only authority are moderators and even they are often criticized if they use their abilities against public opinion. The reddit voting system also ensures that the most valued and interesting information, according to the site's users, gets the most visibility: unlike at for example in a work place where the managers are heard much more than the new interns.

Instead of the authoritarianism we all must to some extent accept in our daily life, Reddit fosters *egalitarianism*: the equality for all people, to the extent that the site keenly rejects almost all and any authority.

Recent example of how deeply rooted the rejection of authority and egalitarianism is in the Reddit community, is the resignation of Reddit's CEO, Ellen Pao. The resignation followed the dismissal of popular director of talent, Victoria Taylor as well as the closing of five especially harassing subreddits, including the somewhat popular subreddit of r/fatpeoplehate. Due to the dismissal of Victoria, several subreddits shut down as protest and eventually Pao was forced to resign. (Alba, 2015)

How does this rejection of authority and egalitarianism connect to being more disinhibited? In Reddit free speech and egalitarianism are appreciated much higher than in traditional western moral standards. They are for many redditors even more important values than preventing harassment, racism, misogynism or other hate speech. For example popular post on banning r/fatpeoplehate states:

“While FPH (subreddit called fatpeople hate) may have been relatively circlejerky and superficially vicious, it was a subreddit where people would go expressly to vent. Very rarely would personal information be included or anyone targeted and when that does happen, generally the mods were fantastic at shooing off the post.”

/u/ninjapro, 10.06.2015

It's clear that this redditor's take on free speech is that, as long as harm to an individual is not threat, people should be able to say what they want on Reddit. Even if it's hate speech. Even the Reddit management responsible for banning the subreddit, did so only because it was afraid of individual harassment stating :

We want as little involvement as possible in managing these interactions but will be involved when needed to protect privacy and free expression, and to prevent harassment. (Woollacott, 2015)

As we can see, the Reddit ethics are very allowing and accepting to venting or other toxic forms of disinhibition just as long as they don't go over certain barriers – and sometimes even when they do.

Another difference between traditional western and Reddit values is the ***appreciation of skepticism and critical thinking skills*** over honesty or earnestness. As one Redditor puts it:

"It's the Internet, people are skeptical of even Mundane things."
/u/mad_hatter0, 1.2.2014

For a redditor, believing others at face value or giving them the benefit of doubt is not admirable, but naive behavior. A good illustration of how Reddit fosters criticality over earnestness is the previously discussed meme *"you really think someone would do that - just go on the Internet and tell lies."* The meme is of course ironical, and it's usually referred to, whenever someone is perceived too be gullible by other users.

Even though the site also shuns some deceptive behavior, in Reddit the ultimate responsibility lies with the reader, not the teller of the story. Someone would indeed just go on the Internet and tell lies, you have to decide for yourself what to believe.

Despite the egalitarianism and fostering critical thinking skills, would argue that there exists ***collective self-esteem*** in Reddit. Redditors are also constantly on the watch for moral deprivation or wrong usage of the site. The previous comment on moderator action in terms of banning subreddits was fueled by defending the sites core values and ethics. Similarly also unfunny subscription and reddiquette compliance are under the radar. One example is this concerned redditor:

"The first time I visited the site (2009), I remember a thread with the title: "Are there any other people who want to comment on Reddit but are afraid to because of how smart everybody is?"

Can anyone imagine someone saying that on a "default" subreddit today? There were probably 100 comments from people agreeing that they were intimidated by the intelligence of other commenters, and so never commented themselves. Every time someone says the site hasn't changed that much, I think back to that thread and take stock of the fact that it is a completely different (and far, far worse)

experience...

/u/radwimp, 21.01.2015

What I think these findings imply, is that online disinhibition effect is not, because people on Reddit are free of ethics and values, but rather they are bound by different ethics and values. There exists a consciousness of a kind and social identity in virtual communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, Bagozzi, 2000) and Reddit is no exception. The social identity is just based different rules and norms than in our daily life.

To ad on to that, the social identity of Reddit is strongly associated with the whole *Internet as a culture*. A lot of the abbreviations and memes are used in only in Reddit, but in other virtual communities like imgur or 9gag. As we have earlier seen, the skepticism, egalitarianism and freedom of speech are often defended in the name of Internet. E.g. *"It's the Internet, people are skeptical of even Mundane things."* or *"I understand the apprehension to take a story at face value. This is the internet. But I'm reluctant to divulge much more than this to the internet. Because pretty much anyone can go on the internet."* There are even multiple pictures circulating the Internet describing how these communities differ or how they line up in the "digestive system of the Internet."

Thus, I would suggest that whereas the Finnish culture is strongly bound and influenced by the western culture or ideology, Reddit is bound by the ideologies born from the Internet culture.

10.5. Empowerment as the Key Reward of Online Disinhibition

To recap, redditors are enabled to dissociate themselves from their RL identities through the pseudonymous nature of the site. When dissociating themselves, redditors can often express or confess things they couldn't, if their account was related to their RL identity.

However, even in the realms of virtual reality, we are at heart social creatures – we want to be liked and we want belong. Instead of being free of any cultural norms, ethics or values, the anonymity of Reddit enables us to take part of a different set of cultural norms, ethics and values. This different communications' culture is prompted by text-basedness and lack of cues as well as the Internet shifting the way we see our values and world. In Reddit we are allowed and expected to use more colorful and more expressive language. We are also more likely to lean towards egalitarianism and appreciation of critical thinking skills, rather than authoritarianism and integrity. This draws the picture of the context and the cognitive implications of this context in which Redditors operate.

To understand the online disinhibition effect wholly, we need to also look at how these cognitive changes affect our self. So next, I'm to look at what motivates us to engage in disinhibition under this context and how engaging in it might further change our cognitions.

The social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) states that humans behave or do not behave in certain way depending on whether we –or others we observe– are rewarded or punished by this behavior and the outcome of the behavior. According to the social cognitive theory **outcome expectations** are the rational side of our actions: when we expect a positive outcome from our actions we will act a certain way. The positive outcome can come in forms of tangible or intangible returns like physical rewards, enjoyment, status gain or other positive outcomes. On the other hand, expected negative outcomes like pain, negative attention or status loss might weaken our willing to participate. (Hsu et al., 2006)

When looking from the perspective of the social cognitive theory, it is clear that Redditors engaging in disinhibited behavior online need more than just the cognitive context to behave disinhibitedly. They need to have a positive outcome expectation.

Next, I will look at what the outcome expectations on acting disinhibitedly are from the perspective of their effect on identity and self. This approach is on par with my research question and overall approach to online disinhibition. I am interested in what are the positive outcome expectations redditors have for online disinhibition in relation to their identity or perception of self.

Let's start by further exploring the motivations behind online disinhibition. As I have discussed before I was able to find the following motivations for online disinhibition: *compensating for the lack of visual cues, venting, feelings of (moral) superiority, humor, finding similar others, receiving moral support and receiving advice*. However, I will leave three of these motivations behind in my reflections.

Two of these motivations: *compensating for the lack of visual cues* and *humor* can be explained by the different communications' culture in Reddit. The motivation behind the disinhibition that is just about humor and compensation for the lack of visual cues is not unique to disinhibition. Rather, it is this kind of disinhibition has other motivations not related to disinhibited behavior. In addition, when seeking for *concrete advice* redditors are trying to finding some tangible returns –thus it is not a motivation necessarily connected to our identity and self in a very meaningful or obvious way.

Now let's start our reflection. The next motivation I could find for both emphatic and unemphatic disinhibition was *venting*. Simply stating and letting out your secrets anger on others in safe environment seems to lead to reduced stress in redditors. These finding are on par with Pennebaker et al. (1990) suggestion that even anonymous confessions of concealed and shameful subjects can significantly reduce our health symptoms and stress. As /u/ebhs says *"At least if I say it here I'm getting it off my chest...."*

The motivation I could find behind toxic and deceptive disinhibition was *feelings of (moral) superiority*, Let's look at the feeling of moral superiority with the help of the case of Sunil Tripathi.

Tripathi was a missing college student and one of the most famous victims of a Reddit witch-hunt gone bad. The harassment of Tripathi was led in the subreddit /r/findthebostonbomber, dedicated to finding the Boston Marathon bombers before the police. The subreddit followers determined Tripathi as a strong suspect on the bombing case on the basis. Tripathi's family's "*Help Us Find Sunil Tripathi*" Facebook page was flooded with harsh and untrue posts about the student as well as threats. Reddit was forced to issue a public apology for the subreddit /r/findthebostonbomber and for encouraging an "online witch hunt." (Lee, 2013)

One redditor described explanation to why this is allowed to happen as:

Because the people furiously mashing F5 on those Boston threads over in r/news want to continue to believe that they're Internet detectives and that the transcribing of police scanners is aiding in the capture of these people.

/u/Jerkfish, 19.03.2014

Similarly to the doxxers of the /u/Tanek the poster of the Olive Garder receipt, the redditors harassing Tripathi believed they were doing the right thing. Similarly, successful deception can cause the writer to feel morally or otherwise superior to others – by successfully fooling everyone else you can prove your superiority.

When a redditor makes clever toxic remarks, deceives others successfully or simply harasses them with insults, it makes him feel powerful and capable. He might see himself the online hero or vigilante, or perhaps someone clever enough to deceive others or someone who showed a person 'wrong on the Internet' their place.

In addition to the ones I have already discussed, I was able to find two prominent motivations for confessional behavior and intimacy: *finding similar others* and *receiving emotional support*. Since reddit has such a vast userbase and it can be used anonymously/pseudonymously, finding similar others is much easier in Reddit than in IRL. One redditor states that "*I haven't felt this open or connected in years....*" and another "*Glad to know that I'm not the only one.*"

These findings are similar to McKenna & Bargh's (1998) notion that confessional behavior and finding similar others can cause people with marginalized identities feel that their identity is more acceptable and reduce their inner conflicts. On Reddit this concept is further expanded. The marginalized identity redditors are revealing is not always significant part of someone's identity, like sexual orientation or political views, but rather just a small portion of it like a quirky hobby, odd habit or childhood secret. After all, we all probably have some parts of our self that are marginalized.

As we can see, all of these motivations behind online disinhibition are closely connected to our perception ourselves and our capabilities.

Higgins (1987) discusses the concept of self and identity through arguing that there are three domains of self: the actual self, the ideal self and the ought self. The *actual self* refers to the attributes the person actually has, the *ideal self* to the ones he/she would like to possess while the *ought self* refers to the qualities the person ought to have. Identity conflicts arise when person experiences discrepancies between these different selves. Another concept of self that is essential for our examination of identity in the age of Internet is the concept of *true self*. The concept of true self stems from Rogers (1951). Rogers (1951) theoreticized that therapy is a work towards discovering ones true self. In Rogers' (1951) notion true self is something that exists inside but is not fully expressed in person's current actual self.

If we look at the motivations behind online disinhibition through the conception of self, we can see that through deception and toxic behavior, the redditors are trying to reach their *ideal self* (Higgins, 1987) by acting as superior figures for others. When acting as online vigilantes the redditors think that they are heroes and online vigilantes, defending what is right.

On the other hand, we can look at the deception and toxic behavior through the concept self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a form of self-evaluation that influences our behavior greatly. If we believe in our own capability to execute certain behavior successfully, we are much more likely to execute it. (Hsu et al., 2006). In toxic online disinhibition, instead of posting, because you feel you have something to contribute to the conversation, you post to get the feeling you have something to contribute to.

If we move on to look at the confessional behavior and intimacy, we can see that the emotional comfort is brought by solving contradiction between ones RL identity and one's inner identity. Thus, I would argue that when being intimate and confessional online, redditors can transform their self to be more like their true selves defined by Rogers (1951).

On the other hand *venting*, a motivation behind all kinds of toxic behaviour does not seem to have anything to do with our self, beside that it relieves stress and anxiety in itself.

So how does the concept of empowerment relate to all this? To start, lets study at the concept of empowerment. As discussed before, empowerment can be defined as (Boehm and Staples, 2002; Staples, 1990; Barak et al., 2008):

"Individuals perceived capabilities in coping with various challenges and overcoming obstacles"

The concept of empowerment emphasizes two things: *self-perception* and *anticipated outcomes*. Thus *empowerment* describes a mental state of a person rather than an objective condition (Barak et al. 2008). Hamburger et al. (2008) add on to this by emphasizing the social aspect of empowerment: *it is a concept used when people in minorities overcome social, political and environmental barriers*.

Secondly empowering effects can be found from *identity development*, meaning solving emotional issues of oneself (Turkle, 1995) through for example finding similar others and receiving emotional support for your marginalized identity (Hamburger et al., 2008; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; McKenna et al., 2000).

Similarly, I think that redditors engaging in online disinhibition are seeking and gaining empowering experiences by relieving their stress and anxiety through venting, heightened feelings of self-efficacy, finding similar others as well as receiving emotional support. Why is the concept of empowerment, most suitable for describing this reliefment?

As discussed before, empowerment is a concept often used with marginalized identities overcoming barriers. Similarly, on Reddit people are engaging in online disinhibition to reveal a side of their selves that would normally be a taboo, were it a quirk, illegal activity or racist opinion. Online disinhibition effect gives them a channel to express this, marginalized part of their identity in safe environment, thus giving them empowering experiences.

One of the most interesting aspects of identity and the age of Internet I came across was identity development. In her research, Turkle (1995) met various MUD players who tried to improve their real life identity through developing or showcasing features, skills and emotions on their MUD identities. Most of the interviewees couldn't successfully transfer their MUD identity qualities to RL but for some, MUDs became a way to solve emotional issues and become a better person. Similarly, some of the people marginalized identities researched by McKenna & Bargh, (1998) were able to reveal their identities IRL after receiving support online. Naturally, I became interested in whether redditors are able to transfer their empowering experiences online to their real life.

Through my research, I was able to find out that sometimes redditors are indeed capable of transferring their experiences online to RL. For example, on a thread about the darkest secrets of redditors, many confessing redditors seemed to be prompted by Reddit to take further action on their issues. For example u/ AtA7plus says:

...after careful consideration, a few guilty tears inspired by these comments, and one look at her, I've decided I'm going to talk to her...

/u/AtA7plus, 01.05.2012

Through his confessional behavior /u/AtA7plus was able to address her sister about a serious family issue. Similarly, other redditors have reported that through the emotional support they have received can act as *"my secret fuel to get through a tough day"* or stated that *"Sometimes it's really comforting to have a framework before going into a conversation with your significant other"*

Confessional behavior on Reddit can give the confessor the needed courage or resources to tackle

the problem in real life - or even as it is give them emotional relief and feelings of connectedness.

Thank you for all of your kind words, I have never been told some of these things in my whole life and have been reduced to tears at the love being shown. I am so grateful for everyone's congratulations and support! I have faith in you and your successes empower me too, so keep moving forward!

/u/ tomodachi_desu, 23.03.2015

10.6. Conclusions

What makes people display online disinhibition in Reddit? According to my research the some of the basic features of CMC in virtual communities: anonymity/pseudonymity, lack of cues, and text-basedness create the cognitive context enabling disinhibited behavior. These features together seem to have a significant cogniti effect on how we communicate in the Internet compared to how we communicate FtF.

Through these attributes redditors are able to 1) dissociate themselves from the RL world and identity and 2) assume new communications' culture and finally to 3) assume new values and morals. In more detail: the pseudonymity makes it possible for a redditor to dissociate themselves from their RL identity, while lack of cues and text-basedness have in the course of time created a new kind of more disinhibited communications' culture. Finally, in the virtual community of Reddit, new egalitarian, anti-authoritarian and values and ethics have emerged, making disinhibited behavior more accepted. These values and ethics are based on the Internet as a culture and as communications device.

All of this is meaningful for the community members because disinhibited behavior gives redditors feelings of *empowerment* or perceived capabilities in coping with various challenges and overcoming obstacles. Online disinhibition can create empowering experiences through venting, finding similar others, heightened feelings of self-efficacy as well as receiving emotional support.

The empowering experiences are can be meaningful in developing one's identity. Thus, engaging in disinhibited behavior can sometimes lead to positive changes in ones identity IRL.

With this model, I aim to describe the features of online disinhibition effect in the context of Reddit in simple, graphic way:

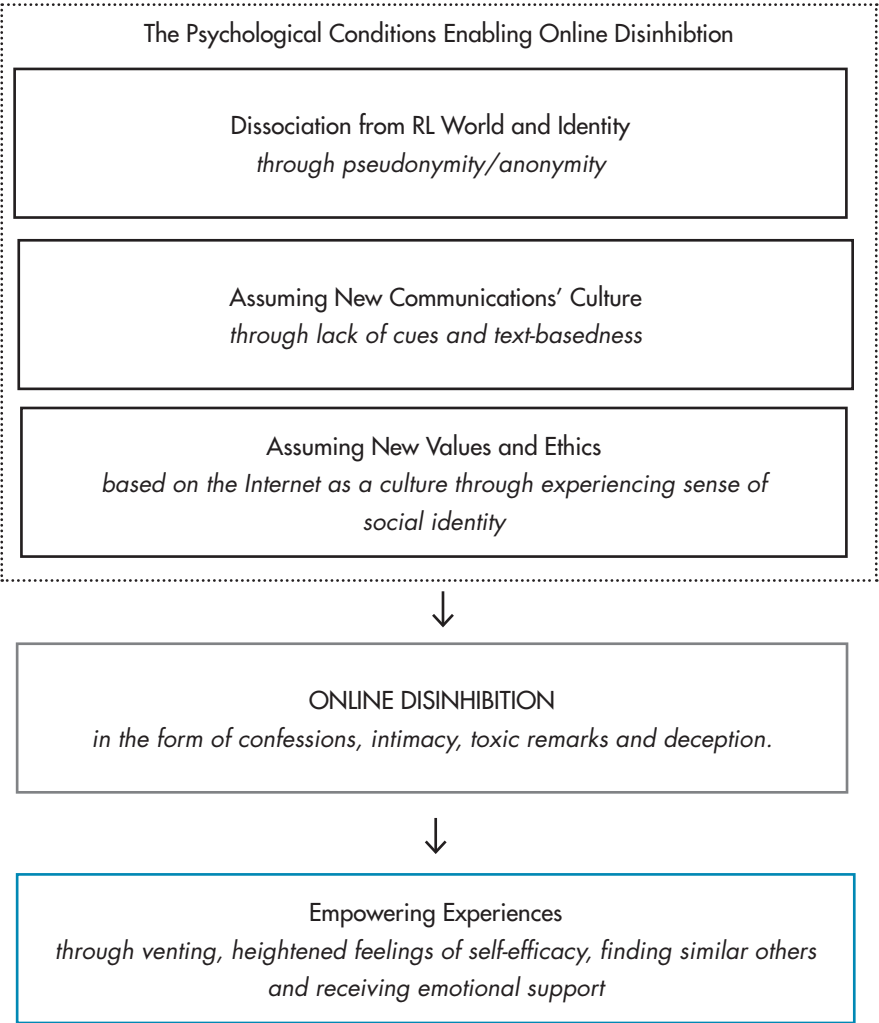


Figure 3. Online disinhibition mechanism in the virtual community of Reddit

11. Discussion

11.1. Overview

How does the online disinhibition effect in Reddit compare to what literature has previously been researched on these subjects? In this chapter, I'm going to look at how my research relates to the previous studies made in 1) computers as mediators of communications 2) the Internet and changing modes of thinking 3) understanding virtual communities 4) discourse on online disinhibition effect and 5) identity on the age of Internet & empowerment. In addition to directly reflecting my findings to previous literature I will also take on the path of guesswork, making up what might be the synergies and implications of my research and previous literature on the online disinhibition effect.

11.2. Computers as Mediators of Online Disinhibition Effect

From my research, I found that three characteristics of CMC especially contribute to the online disinhibition in the context of Reddit: text-basedness, lack of cues and pseudonymity/anonymity. Furthermore, I concluded that text-basedness and lack of cues especially influence *the formation of new kind of communications culture*. Pseudonymity/anonymity on the other hand *enables the redditor to dissociate themselves from their RL identity*.

Similar ideas have also been discussed by other researchers. Interviewees of Turkle (1995) and Henderson & Gilding (2004) both suggest that a more disclosed communications style is typical to an on online environment. In addition, at least some of their interviewees experienced separation from their RL identities. For Henderson & Gilding (2004) some of the interviewees had completely separated their persona from their RL while others were more laid-back and were willing to meet their MUD friends IRL. Just like in, my research Henderson & Gilding (2004) also concluded that anonymity, lack of cues and text-basedness all contribute to the more open and disclosed style of communications online.

However, where I found that text-basedness and lack of cues contribute to the different communications culture, Henderson & Gilding's (2004) findings are focused more on *how individual interviewees might experience the different aspects of CMC*. In other words, their study did not find that there was a certain culture, values or ethics prevalent to contributing to the more disinhibited behavior.

It is also interesting, that not all aspects of CMC were important to all interviewees - one found text-basedness as important since it allowed him time to think, while another was more liberated by others not seeing her emotional reactions. Similarly, Turkle (1995) found that the MUD players can actually also experience the virtual world differently from each other, each finding different elements

as liberating and some finding relief to their problems while others don't.

Why do my findings account for culture where Henderson & Gilding (2004) –or to some extent Turkle (1005) –don't. Firstly, I think that Reddit as a virtual community is unlike MUDs - as opposed to individual, dialogical encounters, Reddit is focused on the content and mass production. I think that while MDs are all about one-on-one discussions and finding friends, Reddit is about the general consensus and finding interesting content. The voting-based platform makes it easy to build norms and culture as it allows easy and instant acceptance and unacceptable. I also think that because disclosing in Reddit is more targeted to the whole of community, it is more about what is accepted and jointly negotiated. I also think that since my research method has been ethnographic, rather than interviewing I have been more prone to explore the cultural side of Reddit than all the varying individual experiences.

Suler (2004) takes a psychological perspective on online disinhibition and CMC suggesting *dissociative anonymity and dissassociative imagination* are the psychological phenomena behind online disinhibition effect. These theories state that when a person communicates online, they feel that they are acting as a separate entity from their offline persona, thus making disinhibited behavior easier.

In dissociative anonymity the online self becomes compartmentalized part of self, whose moral choices don't concern our IRL persona (Suler 2004). Dissociative imagination is further version of dissociative anonymity as it suggests that we can escape to the online world and to our online persona and make the whole online world a dimension where real world responsibilities don't exist (Suler, 2004). So not just our self, but the whole world is now separate from IRL.

Compared to Suler's (2004) theories, my findings suggest that redditors are indeed able to dissociate themselves from their RL identity as well as the RL world as whole. On the other hand, in contrast to Suler's (2004) findings, I would suggest that rather than being just "freed" from their RL identity, ethics and values redditors are now tied by different set of morals, values and culture.

These findings are similar to how the two psychological views: deindividuation effect (Zimbardo, 1970) and SIDE model (Reicher, 1982) differ. Some would perhaps argue that just disengagement from the IRL community itself causes people to act disinhibited. As the concept of **deindividuation** and the famous Stanford prison experiments (Zimbardo, 1970) might suggest: when person's self-awareness – in this case, by hiding behind one's keyboard, rather than one's uniform – is blocked they are free to not regulate their behavior, reacting on cues based on their emotional state.

I would suggest, that rather than just blocking their own identity and acting on instinct, redditors actually assume new communications culture, ethics and morals. They are actually replacing their individual identity with group identity as the SIDE-model would suggest (Reicher, 1982).

Other researchers have also found a link between text-basedness and lack of cues prompting more disinhibited behavior. The pioneer of CMC studies, Walther (1996, 1997) suggests that CMC communicators take part of an *overattribution process*. This means that in the scarcity of other cues communicators place more importance on the subtle messages in text. Also, because the communicator doesn't need to concentrate on making and reading physical cues, he is free to concentrate more on expressing themselves through text. (Walther, 1996).

Walther's (1996) overattribution process resembles my findings on how redditors tend to compensate for the lack of cues and text-basedness with more expressive and imaginative wordings. Again, as opposed to Walther (1996), my research connects the expressive language with the community's communications' culture.. Again, I think my findings differ from Walther (1996) from obvious reasons. As a communications' researcher Walther (1996, 1997) concentrated his studies on one-on-one communication between two research subjects. However, I study online disinhibition in the context of a virtual community. In addition, Reddit as an online community is very oriented on joint-reactions and co-creation rather than dialogue between two individuals. Thus, it is natural that my findings relate to a community and its' culture more than Walther's.

There were also one feature of CMC my studies didn't find contributing to the online disinhibition effect: asynchronicity. Suler (2004) suggest that asynchronicity of CMC communications is a factor that plays a part in the emergence of the online disinhibition effect. In more detail, Suler (2004) suggests lack of cues paired with asynchronicity means that online you don't have to face other people's emotional reactions to your communications. This can lead to an "emotional hit and run" (Suler 2004: K. Munro, unpublished observations, 2003).

However, from my research I would conclude, that while asynchronicity may lead to some people being more rude, it can also make some people consider their words much more carefully. People in Reddit can often confess that they are afraid to comment on the site in fear of facing toxic remarks and downvotes. So, while asynchronicity might sometimes enable toxic disinhibition in Reddit, other people it might actually discourage from stating toxic or intimate things.

What effects does asynchronicity have? Similarly to Schau & Gily (2003) and Walther (1997) I would argue that asynchronicity gives redditors a way to *more easily manage the expressions* they want to give out of themselves and compose their messages in peace. On Reddit, this may lead to disinhibition – or inhibition– depending on the individual's personality.

11.3. Reddit Values and Ethics as Reflectors of the Internet Age Culture

As we have discussed before, many researchers (Granic & Lamey, 2000; Turkle, 1995, Rheingold, 1993) including pioneers of the Internet culture research suggest that technology and the Internet

do not only change what we do, but *how we think*.

Unlike phones or televisions, computers were not designed just *one specific communication in mind* (Postmes et al., 1998). The Internet as a system, was designed to have no central control. Instead every connected to the network had equal authority to pass and receive messages (Granic & Lamey, 2000). From the very early days of the Internet, people have used it differently than what it was originally meant for.

Granic & Lamey (2000) suggest Internet's unique properties may give a rise to changes in contemporary modes of thought that occurred first with the printed word. In contrast to the authoritarian rules and tight hierarchies, we are constantly exposed to multitude of opinions, ever updating information, changing rules and emerging communities.

In this new environment, Granic & Lamey (2000) and Turkle (1995) suggest that we are more inclined to perspectivistic world view, meaning that there is not one – but multiple truths. Thus we might be more inclined to believe that there are multiple, equally right answers to one question depending on where you look at it. In addition, the researchers state that critical thinking skills are more valued than before. Previously you were able to –or forced to– accept the printed word as the truth. However, on the Internet you have to be watchful of what you believe in. There are no rules on who can write or what they can say.

As discussed before, my research shows that many redditors relate to the Internet as culture to which they base their values on. Reddits foster the many of the principles that the Internet, according to Granic & Lamey (2000) and Turkle (1995) as a whole fosters. As stated before, I found that redditors especially foster two values: egalitarianism and critical thinking skills.

I feel that this is very natural development, as it is easy to draw comparisons on Reddit and the Internet as a whole. Just like the Internet is based on every node having equal rights to pass messages, no pre-determined purpose and no centralized authority, Reddit has very little central control, no pre-determined purpose and everyone has the equal authority to vote the messages. Anyone can go on Reddit and be exposed to a multitude of opinions, and truths.

Just like Granic & Lamey (2000), I found that critical thinking skills are very valued in the Reddit community. In fact, they are valued much more than some traditional values like integrity or honesty, thus moving the ultimate responsibility of deception for the conductor of the deception to the person lapsing on to it.

However, in contrast with Turkle (1995) and Granic & Lamey (2000) I found egalitarianism more important to Reddit than perspectivism. I feel that due to the voting-based nature of Reddit, often consensus is sought after on the site. There are definitely truths Reddit agrees to, and truths it doesn't.

However, everyone does have an equal opportunity to voice them, not based on any kind of authority. Reddit is all about equality, but it is not about putting the same weight on differing opinions. On Reddit, everyone has a vote but due to the voting process, not every opinion has the same importance.

Some differences aside, I still feel that seeing Reddit as a reflector of the values of the age of Internet can be beneficial in understanding how the sites values and ethics, and also online disinhibition effect have formed over time.

Egalitarianism, rejection of authority and appreciation free speech are a natural outcome of a user interface based on these principles (Postmes et al. 1998, Granic & Lamey, 2000). And in an environment that allows all speech and rejects all authority, it naturally becomes important to be able to be skeptical and foster your critical thinking skills. Thus, my research supports and adds on to the previous researchers stating that the age of Internet, changes what we do and how we think (Granic, 2000; Turkle, 1995; Rheingold, 1993) as well as what are our inner morals.

As Howard Rheingold already stated in 1993:

“The medium will, by its nature . . . be a place where people often end up revealing themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms”

11.4. Redefining Commuality

The term ”community” originally referred mainly to geographical or local communities tied to a specific location (Wellman 1988; Wellman & Gulia, 1997). I wasn’t until the late 1980s Barry Wellman introduced the concept of social network communities (Wellman, 1988): in social network communities the community was not tied into a geographical location, but by social ties. Later on, Howard Rheingold (1993) introduced the concept of virtual communities. These early ideas reflect on how the concept of community has actually chanced throughout time.

I think my research can also be seen as participating to the discourse on what is community and commuality today. In this discourse, I find Komito’s (1998) findings to support my own. Komito (1998) associates the features of voluntarism, fluidness and egalitarianism typical to virtual communities to foraging societies. Similarly to these findings, for example Bagozzi & Dholakia (2002) have recognized that virtual communities are driven by volitional choice and that for example Butler (1999) has noted that the communities are highly fluid with a stream of constantly changing members. In my research, I found that fluidness and volitional choice are definitive features of Reddit as community also.

According to Komito (1998) modern virtual communities share a lot of qualities with pre-farming era foraging societies, in which people were also free to exit and enter at their own will and based on the value gained from the society. Thus Komito (1998) suggests that rather than seeing virtual communities as declining communality and depriving morals and closeness to other people, as some (Putnam, 1995), virtual communities are actually just a return to older form of community. When people are not bound by geographical location or resources it gives, our communality can also be more fluid and egalitarian.

In my opinion, a Komito's (1998) findings resonate strongly with my own. However, there are also differences. I would not go as far as state that virtual communities are just like foraging societies,- Still, the comparison is a useful tool in understanding that while virtual communities differ from what we might traditionally perceive as community, they're not worse communities –just different.

The important thing to understand about Reddit is, that it is not structured like as what have historically perceived as the ideal community (Komito, 1998; Wellman, 1988). Rather Reddit is much more fluid, vast and egalitarian network with different set of values and ethics. Foraging society is a much better comparison to it than a suburban community.

Still, there are also important differences between Reddit and foraging societies. While a foraging community is a small community based on need, Reddit is an incomprehensibly vast community based purely on leisure. While foraging societies had fluidness, in Reddit it has escalated to a new level. Thus I would suggest, that virtual communities make up for a completely new category of community.

It is important to note, that while Reddit is loose, fluid and individualistic, it still holds a collective moral and sense of belonging. Similar findings have been done e.g. by Komito's (1998) on Usenet and MUD's. This sense of collective moral and identity has been widely described by virtual community researchers. Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) describe this sense of collectiveness as a consciousness of a kind or "*an intrinsic connection to other members and a collective sense of separation of other members*". Bagozzi (2000) describes the communality with the term *social identity* consisting of self-awareness of membership, feeling of belongingness and collective self-esteem.

Similarly, even though the virtual community of Reddit is incredibly large, fluid and volitional, there still exists a social identity, at least in the form of shared ethics and values.

This notion is extremely interesting since it stretches what we understand as community or communality. One can share their ethics and values and feeling of belongingness even with people they will never meet, they have very little in common with in terms of demographics and who they share no responsibilities with.

11.5. Empowerment and Online Disinhibition Effect

Henderson & Gilding (2004) and Turkle (1995) found in their research that for some of their interviewees online environment was a not just a safe place to let out their anger and frustration, but also a place to develop their identity and solve their emotional issues. In her research, Turkle (1995) presented a comparison of two different MUDders: another being able to solve and develop as a person through his MUD usage, another incapable of this.

Similarly, in my research it became evident that some redditors were able to solve their real life issues or gain long-term emotional relief after engaging in confessional and intimate disinhibition. Perhaps not surprisingly, I was not able to find examples of redditors gaining long term benefits from engaging in toxic disinhibition. Similarly, Turkle (1995) found that for some interviewees no amount of venting online would bring relief.

Among these findings, I couldn't help but wonder, if toxic disinhibition, although seemingly bringing emotional relief, can not solve one's emotional issues in the long term. Confessing painful secrets, discussing intimately and receiving emotional support might transfer to one's RL identity. On the other hand it would seem unlikely that the rush of power or relief toxic venting or deception might bring is lasting. Perhaps only when redditors are able to **gain social support** – through finding similar others or receiving emotional support, they are able to transfer what they have experienced to their RL identity.

Another reason for finding permanent empowering experiences from disinhibited behavior in Reddit, can be explained through the concept of *true self*. In my research I concluded that while the expressors of toxic remarks and deception are often looking for resembling their ideal self, the intimacy and confessionality is prompted by expressing what we truly feel inside. Similarly, for example Bargh et al. (2002) suggest that for some people the Internet might be a place where they can more freely express their true self.

Perhaps being able to present what you truly believe your identity is online via heightened disinhibition, can relief the tension you normally have between your true self and your actual self. This at least would seem to be a strong part of how confessional behavior has made some redditors lives better.

Another issue worth of considering is that if one can solve RL issues in a virtual community, what other kind of takings we might take with us from the virtual community? Can participating to Reddit mold our values and morals in the real world in a permanent way?

Parallel to my reflection Granic & Lamey (2000) theoreticize that the age of Internet, with less authority and more importance on one's own capabilities may lead to *life-changing experiences*, as well as to the development of *personal belief about efficacy and control in general* (Granic & Lamey,

2000).

More research should be conducted to see if Granic & Lamey's (2000) theory holds true. At least for some redditors, participation on the site has offered new ideas, values and personal beliefs --often differing from the values, beliefs and ideas their family, or geographical community offers. For example r/atheism is a safe haven for many unreligious people living on the bible belt of the US. In general redditors tend to gain at least some personal beliefs about efficacy and control. For example strong scientific values, and disregard of alternative medicine, anti-vaccine or creationism are prominent on the site. U/undesirable desires' thought provokingly comments his transition since joining Reddit as follows:

When I first joined this website I used it mainly for entertainment, but once I dug deeper I found a gold mine. I'm afraid to think about who I would be without this website. I don't think I would have grown up as much as I have, which is a weird thing to say for a website. But I don't think it's a bad thing at all.

From comments like these, I base my belief that for generation Z the Internet and its' communities will as important or even more important than traditional communities in forming their values and beliefs. Thus, the Internet will change how we think even in the most fundamental ways.

12. Summary

12.1. Contributions & Theoretical Implications

In this study, I have explored the concept of *online disinhibition* first coined by Suler (2004). Where Suler's (2004) preliminary research is theoretical exploration, I have taken the concept to an actualized environment of a specific virtual community. My study adds on to Suler's (2004) definition of online disinhibition and explores its manifestations in the context of Reddit.

Drawing from multiple discourses such as CMC studies, virtual communities, identity and self as well as the psychological implications of Internet usage I aim to create a holistic picture of the cognitions involved in the online disinhibition effect in Reddit.

Through my research, we can better understand how participating to a virtual community the context molds the way we think and act. This motivates us to engage in disinhibited behavior in our search for empowering experiences. Sometimes these empowering experiences can lead to changes in our self and identity and even concrete action in real life. Thus this study outlines the cognitive context for disinhibited behavior, the motivations behind this disinhibition as well as the implications this behavior has on the individual and their identity.

I shed light to the previously little studied subject of online disinhibition in the context of virtual communities. I also explore, how in this contexts, the identity and virtual community studies (e.g. Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Henderson & Gilding, 2004; and Kozinet, 2002) can meet the psychological perspective on Internet usage (e.g. Suler, 2002 and Henderson & Gilding, 2004) and still the CMC studies (e.g. Walther, 1996, 1997).

In the context of the virtual community studies, I shed light into how the virtual community communications culture might differ from our IRL communications. I also support virtual community pioneer's like Turkle's (1995) and Rheingold (1993) in their findings that participating in virtual communities can mold our identity in meaningful ways.

From the perspective of the Online disinhibition effect I contribute to Suler's (2002) as well as Henderson & Gilding's (2004) ideas that the Internet –or in this study specifically virtual communities– creates unique cognitive context. This context then enables disinhibition. My findings also contribute to the context of online disinhibition in that I suggest that community culture, values and ethics can play a significant role in as enablers of the disinhibited behavior. This is something that has been overlooked by previous researchers of online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2002; Walther, 1996, 1997). Thus, I offer a perspective of *social psychology* to the psychological effects of online disinhibition.

To further contribute to the social psychology of online disinhibition I look at two competing theories on group psychology: the SIDE model and the deindividuation effect. According to my research this disinhibition can be better explained by conforming to the group norms than repelling them. Thus I feel that the SIDE model (Reicher, 1982; Postmes et. al 1998) is better in explaining the online disinhibition than deindividuation effect (Zimbardo, 1970).

Drawing from my exploration and these various discourses, I suggest that in the context of Reddit, online disinhibition is made possible by certain cognitive factors, which allow us to both dissociate from our RL identity and to assume the morals and culture of a new kind of community. Furthermore, I suggest that unlike Suler's (2004) metaphor of emotional hit and run, online disinhibition is a more complex process. We do not act disinhibitedly just simply because we can. Rather online disinhibition, at least in the context of virtual communities, is process involving conforming to group morals as well as a search for powerful empowering experiences. In addition its' harmful qualities, online disinhibition can sometimes even permanently change for the better how we see the world and ourself.

All and all, my contribution to the previous studies on the subject on online disinhibition is offering a specific context for the disinhibition and studying the behavior in this context. Through my netnography, I have been able to add on to previous theories by bringing in the concept of conformity to shared communications' culture, values and ethics.

From a bigger perspective, the contribution of my research is to offer a glimpse to the future: how the way we communicate, feel connection and understand the world will be changing in meaningful ways in the upcoming years. As I've stated many times before during this thesis, the Internet will not only change what we do, but even how we think. One example of these changing cognitions is the online disinhibition effect.

12.2. Limitations Of the Study

In my research the method is qualitative and netnographic, thus my research is always limited by how I see and interpret the world. This study is only my perception and sense-making of the research materials. I try to shed light on how I think my fellow redditors see and make sense of their world, but my perception will always be imperfect, since I can look the material through my perceptions and mental models.

Netnography as a research method means that I am only able to study what people have voluntarily and without any guarantee for truthfulness chosen to share of themselves online. It might be, that there are underlying issues redditors choose not share of themselves online, or latent cognitions they are unaware of and thus unable to share. It has to also be remembered that as my study is based on

the constructivistic paradigm, even though I try to draw some preliminary generalizations of how the online disinhibition shapes our cognitions, my model only explores what are all the factors that might play a part in online disinhibition effect. My study is still based on individual experiences and as individual all redditors experience the online disinhibition effect uniquely. Quantitative analysis would be needed for creating actual models on the online disinhibition effect in Reddit.

In this thesis I have limited my study on online disinhibition effect on the two most prominent displays of online disinhibition: confessions and intimacy of and toxic remarks and deception aimed at others. To understand the full scale of what online disinhibition effect might mean, we should also look at unusual acts of kindness as well as perhaps some other more sophisticated methods of displaying disinhibited behavior.

I have also focused my study on the psychological implications of online disinhibition: thus my research will largely be focused on this point-of-view, rather than for example the communal or cultural perspective of the online disinhibition.

There are also some limitations concerning my literature review. Firstly, I will assume that computer mediated communications (CMC) is mostly asynchronous text-based. This means that CMC is not happening in real time and is largely text. In practice this means that I will largely ignore the more recent or advanced methods of CMC like video blogs, instant messaging, chat rooms, video roulette etc. This is because of two factors:

1. As a bulletin board systems Reddit is largely text-based and always asynchronous. There is not much relevance in addressing the challenges of other forms of CMC.
2. Most CMC research is also done on text-based and asynchronous systems, so referring to CMC as such is a natural choice.

Secondly, in this thesis I will concentrate on the *concept virtual communities as communities connecting people who are otherwise strangers to each other.* (e.g. Wellman et al., 1996; Rheingold, 1996). In the discourse on virtual communities, special interest has always been paid to commercial aspects of virtual communities. This means that a lot of the virtual community research has been dedicated to work-related virtual communities (e.g. Finholt et al., 1993; Constant et al. 1996; Ardichvili et. al, 2003), the work-related virtual communities however, do differ from “more natural” virtual communities in such that participation is not completely voluntary and people might know each other already. Thus I will also ignore research on social media channels, like Facebook or Twitter, since they consist of mainly communicating with people you are already familiar with.

12.3. What Next?

Online disinhibition effect, as well as virtual communities and how the Internet changes the way we think offer a vast pool of intriguing subjects. Personally, I'm especially interested in pondering how the Internet age or participating in virtual communities might change our way of speaking, morals or values in RL. For example, do people become more egalitarian, skeptical or anti-authoritarian after spending extended periods of time online. Examples of how Internet might have changed our society to more skeptical and anti-authoritarian might include for example the recent demand of "demolition of norms" in Finland.

In terms of online disinhibition effect I would like to see research done on online disinhibition effect without anonymity: it would be interesting to see, whether the display's of online disinhibition effect are different or not existing in communities without pseudonymity, like Facebook or Twitter. Online disinhibition effect itself is still fairly little studied subject and its' causes and effects should be studied in more detail in a wider spectrum of virtual communities and other forms of CMC like online gaming.

In terms of online disinhibition effect in the context of Reddit, it would have been interesting to continue my research with some in-depth interviewees on people displaying benign or toxic disinhibition in the community. This would have allowed me to dig deeper in the underlying reasons and psychological mechanism behind online disinhibition, as now my material consisted only of stories people had willingly already shared online. In addition, since my study is qualitative and exploratory a quantitative and more causal research would be needed to further dissect the online disinhibition mechanism in the context of Reddit - or other virtual communities.

13. References

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All my research data collected from www.reddit.com in 2013-2015 concerning this thesis can be retrieved from: <https://delicious.com/sallakoivu>.