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Revisiting Goffman: towards a social constructivist approach to the presentation of the self within virtual environments

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Grace Gossler
s1328409

Supervision and Examination Committee
Dr. Anneke M. Sools
Prof. Dr. Gerben J. Westerhof

Department Psychology, Health & Technology

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Begreifst du denn nicht, du gelehrter Herr: dass ich dir darum gefalle und für dich wichtig bin, weil ich wie eine Art Spiegel für dich bin, weil mir innen etwas ist, was dir Antwort gibt und dich versteht?

Hermann Hesse, Der Steppenwolf (1947)

REVISITING GOFFMAN: TOWARDS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO THE
PRESENTATION OF THE SELF WITHIN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

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Summary

Purpose: The purpose of this explorative study is to (re-)introduce, and thereby explore, the question, how the presentation of the self in the virtual environment relates to the presentation of the self in the in-vivo environment as experienced by adolescent e-users (main question). Drawing on Goffman's theatrical metaphor (1956), prior research investigating self-presentation on social networks is predominantly limited to an individualistic approach to the self. From a social constructivist approach, however, revisiting Goffman's theatrical metaphor provides for another and potentially more explorable theoretical approach. In particular, it will, then, be explored how the *authentication process*, which underlies the constitution of the self, takes shape (sub-question). **Method:** A group of eight adolescents aged 16-21, constituting a 'micro social network' of strong and latent social ties, participated in a focus group discussion. After they were invited to give two written self-presentational performances both directed to a virtual audience (Facebook) and an in-vivo audience (group meeting), they reflected on the experience of the self-presentation in both environments. First, a qualitative thematic analysis was applied to investigate emerging themes mentioned during the focus group discussion. Second, each theme was analyzed as to how it relates to the *authentication process*. Third, an integrational representation model has been constructed summarizing and structuring the given findings. **Results:** Four themes have been identified as covering for the adolescents' experience of the presentation of the self: *isolative potential* (I.), *controllability* (II.), *realness and make-belief* (III.), and *sharing and echoing* (IV.) According to the adolescents' experience the *authentication process* was found to be impaired on Facebook as it fails to account for meaningful sharing (=communication). **Conclusions and Discussion**: According to the adolescents the content being shared on Facebook as well as the lack of sufficient response are unsatisfactory regarding the purpose of engaging in an *authentication process* within social discourse. The study reveals the self-reflective potential of adolescents in exploring environments offered to them to engage in social discourse. Technology, meant to provide a channel for communication, is abandoned as soon as it disappoints in serving as platform for meaningful self-presentation, that is, meaningful sharing which contributes to the process of self-construction. The value of the social constructivist approach to the process of self-constitution is discussed including implications and recommendations for further research.

Samenvatting

Doel: Het doel van deze exploratieve studie is de (re-)introductie, en daardoor de exploratie van de vraag, hoe de presentatie van het zelf binnen de virtuele omgeving is gerelateerd aan de presentatie van het zelf in de in-vivo omgeving (hoofdvraag). Goffman's metafoor van het toneelstuk (1956) heeft aanleiding gegeven tot onderzoek naar de presentatie van het zelf in de virtuele omgeving. Eerder onderzoek lijkt echter beperkt tot een individualistische benadering van het zelf. Vanuit een sociaal-constructivistische benadering stelt de onderzoeker voor, Goffman's metafoor van het toneelstuk te herintroduceren met de bedoeling een andere en potentieel sterker exploratieve benadering te vergunnen. In het bijzonder, zal worden geëxploreerd hoe de *authenticatie proces*, welke de constructie van het zelf ter grondslag ligt, plaatsvindt (deelvraag). **Methode:** Een groep van acht adolescenten van de leeftijdsgroep 16-21, welke een 'micro sociaal netwerk' door sterke en zwakkere bonden vormen, hebben deel genomen aan een focus groep discussie. Nadat zij uitgenodigd werden, twee geschreven zelfpresentaties aan zowel een virtueel publiek (Facebook) als ook een in-vivo publiek (groepsgesprek) te geven, hebben zij gereflecteerd op de ervaring van de zelfpresentatie in allebei omgevingen. Ten eerste werd een kwalitatieve thematische analyse toegepast om de opkomende thema's tijdens de discussie inhoudelijke te dekken. Ten tweede werd elk thema geanalyseerd met betrekking tot de *authenticatie proces*. Ten derde werd een integratief representatie model geconstrueerd om de bevindingen samen te vatten en te structureren. **Resultaten**: Vier thema's werden geïdentificeerd met betrekking tot de ervaring van de zelfpresentatie van de adolescenten: (*il)legitieme isolatie* (I.), *beheersbaarheid* (II.), *realiteit en make-belief* (III.) en *delen en resonantie* (IV.). Gebaseerd op de ervaringen van de adolescenten werd gevonden dat de authenticatie proces is belemmerd op Facebook omdat het faalt in het bevorderen van *betekenisvol delen* (=communicatie). **Conclusie en Discussie:** Volgens de adolescenten zorgt datgene wat gedeeld wordt op Facebook zoals ook het gebrek aan voldoende reacties ervoor dat de communicatie als onbevredigend wordt ervaren ten behoeve van het inlaten in de *authenticatie proces* in sociale interactie. De studie toont het zelf-reflectieve potentieel van adolescenten in het exploreren van omgevingen die hun geboden zijn voor sociale interactie. Technologie, bedoelt als communicatiekanaal, wordt afgewezen zodra het niet kan dienen als een platform voor betekenisvolle zelfpresentatie (betekenisvol delen dat bijdraagt aan de proces van de constructie van het zelf). De waarde van sociaal constructivisme om het proces van de zelfconstructie te benaderen is bediscussieerd inclusief implicaties en advies voor verder onderzoek.

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1 Introduction

In this study, I draw on the theatrical metaphor of Goffman (1956) to investigate the presentation of the self in an online social network as related to the self as presented in the in-vivo environment. I will argue, that the popular approach to the investigation of self-presentation on social networks follows an individualistic approach to the self, which holds several implications to it. From a social constructivist approach, however, I propose, revisiting Goffman's theatrical metaphor as providing for a richer and potentially more explorable theoretical approach, which is often omitted when investigating the social and psychological implications of virtual environments. From this point, the changing setting, expanding social interaction to virtual platforms, then, allows for the presentation in both environments as well as the interaction between them. The question raised here is how the presentation of the self in the virtual environment relates to the presentation of the self in the in-vivo environment as experienced by adolescent e-users and, in particular, how the *authentication process*, which underlies the constitution of the self, takes shape.

1.1 *The self as presented in social networks: previous studies and conclusions*

The virtual environment as provided by online social networks has lent itself as subject of intense research in fields ranging from philosophy and social sciences to economics and market design (e.g. investigating e-marketing strategies). Focusing on the implications the virtual online space holds for societal and psychological changes, as well as for mental health, in particular, the former feeds the latter in a sense that it provides theoretical models of and insight into human behavior. As Wilson, Gosling and Graham point out, the social network Facebook, "provides social scientists with an unprecedented opportunity to observe behavior in a naturalistic setting [and] test hypotheses in a novel domain" (2012, p.203).

Likewise, a tremendous and rich amount of research and literature is linked to the *self* as presented online. In a recent literature review on Facebook studies, 412 relevant articles were identified, from which 12% (n=50) covered themes related to *Identity presentation* "defined as the process by which individuals share part of the self with others" (Wilson et al., p.209-210) and 27% (n=112) related to the *Role of Facebook in social interactions*. The focus, amongst others, lies on the "potential for profile authors to manipulate their profile", which poses the "critical question [whether] Facebook profiles convey accurate impressions of the profile owners" (p.210). Gosling, Gaddis and Vazire (2007), for example, investigated

if 'idealized virtual identities' rather than 'accurate portrayals of the user's personalities' are represented on Facebook (in Wilson et al., 2012, p.210).

The literature review on self-presentation in the virtual environment, conducted for the purpose of the present study, reveals a strong tendency of researchers and academics from social sciences to express considerable concern about the negative implications of online social networks. Kramer and Winter (2008) point out that the ability to control one's online profile in what is disclosed to others, offers a more strategic managing of self-presentation. In their recent work on *Cultures of the Internet* (2013), Kirmayer, Raikhel and Rahimi conclude that Facebook "lends itself to oppressive use and abuse, subverting our life narratives and efforts at self-presentation" (2013, p.169). As a new medium of expression, "a new scope of projecting a public persona", "Facebook and other social networking sites encourage participants to treat the self as market commodity, on display for others to judge its attractiveness and seeking always to gain more attention and market share" (p.173).

The term *self-presentation*, then, mainly refers to the notion that "we are all actors on a stage … adapting our presentation of the self to look best to all people" (Rosen, 2012) by particularly drawing on sociologist Erving Goffman's theatrical metaphor of 1956. In his scientifically esteemed work the *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* Goffman reintroduces the illustration of the theatrical metaphor as means of visualizing the self as performing in front of others. Social interaction, then, is seen as an *act*, whereas the term *performance* describes "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way of the other participants" (Goffman, 1956, p.13).

In his works on "*Our Obsession with Technology*" Dr. Larry Rosen states:

> „*Goffman must have anticipated social networking because he described it perfectly when talking about how we are all actors in a play and are presenting the image of ourselves that we want others to see.*" (iDisorder, Chapter: We are all actors on a stage, 2012)

Various researchers have drawn on the theatrical metaphor of Goffman to highlight the *performing* character of the online self-presentation. This has led to the conclusion that fostering self-presentation online provokes or at least correlates with narcissistic tendencies, isolates the self, induces a loss of self-reflective ability, and evokes self-promoting behavior leading to self-centeredness of new dimensions (e.g. Turkle, 2011; Rosen, 2012; Kirmayer et al., 2013).

Moreover, in 2012 Rosen, Cheever and Carrier introduced a "new psychological malady" called *iDisorder,* which, amongst others, proposes that technologies and social networks, in particular, account for narcissism, an extensive preoccupation with oneself, and mental health problems such as major depression. Self-presentation, then, is referred to as an expression of narcissistic tendencies.

Various studies were conducted in this realm. Others also draw on the relationship between narcissistic tendencies and online self-presentation (eg. Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Ong, Ang, Ho, Lim, Lee, 2011; Mehdizadeh, 2010) considering Facebook as "particularly fertile ground for narcissists" (Mehdizadeh, 2010, p.248). In a study on *Self-presentation and belonging on Facebook* it was investigated how personality traits are linked to Facebook behavior (Seidman, 2012). Self-presentational behavior was considered as sharing content on one's profile and Facebook wall and posting of photographs. It was found that low conscientiousness and high neuroticism were best to predict self-presentational behaviors (p.405). It was concluded that Facebook provides a "safe place for self presentation", that allows to reveal "hidden and ideal self-aspects" (p.406).

Although various studies revealed that online self-presentation gives a rather accurate impression of the in-vivo person in question (eg. Back, Stopfer, Vazire, Gaddis, Schukle, Egloff & Gosling, 2010; Waggoner, Smith & Collins, 2009; Weisbuch, Ivcevic & Ambady, 2009), the general tenor centers around the idea that online self-presentation seems to provoke the constitution of a rather ego-centered and alienated self. It, moreover, implies a qualitative difference between real human connection and digital communication, the in-vivo self-presentation versus the virtual presentation.

Self-presentation, then, is first and foremost given a negative connotation linked to online self-promotional behavior. In the same realm, Goffman's theatrical metaphor is brought in to accentuate the notion of the individual 'playing a role' in acting before others in order to shape an ideal self within the online environment.

1.2 *Misreading Goffman: the individualistic approach to the self*

Where does this tendency towards a negatively connoted self-presentation come from? The studies covering for online self-presentation, as mentioned above, seem to share an underlying approach to the self, which beholds the notion of a 'true' or 'inner' self as constituting the very core of the individual. Goffman's theatrical metaphor is, then, interpreted as illustration of the 'performative act' *of* this 'true' or 'inner' self as it presents *itself* to others rather accurately or not.

Not only do the terms 'self-presentation' and 'self-promotion' seem diffused by taking this individualistic approach to the self. In his book: *iDisorder. Understanding our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming its Hold on Us*, Rosen conflates Goffman's theatrical metaphor with the idea of a 'true self' as opposed to an 'idealized self', by drawing on Dr. Carl Rogers' concept of the self of 1951 (2012). Social interaction, then, is considered as merely an act on stage, which can reveal or disguise who 'we really are'. By presenting the idealized self on social networks instead of the 'true self' one is prone to the experience of psychological distress.

Likewise, in a study on the *Activation and expression of the true self on the Internet,* Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) draw the connection between Goffman and Rogers. Goffman is said to have "distinguished between the public self […], and the individual's inner self" (p.34) in line with Rogers, which is said to have "viewed the true self of his clients as actually existing psychologically (…) but not expressed in social life" (p.34). As earlier mentioned, Gosling et al. (2007), in a similar way, investigated if 'idealized virtual identities' rather than 'accurate portrayals of the user's personalities' are represented on Facebook. Regardless of their findings (it was concluded that users actually give 'accurate portrayals' of their personalities), the theoretical background to begin with, determines the scope of its outcome.

Furthermore, the references to the theories of Rogers and Goffman seem flawed. Although psychotherapist and psychologist Carl Rogers proposed a concept of the self as entailing an 'ideal self' as opposed to an 'actual self' (1951), the discreet difference between an 'idealized' and an 'ideal self' is, for the purpose of drawing on his theory, crucial. Rogers did *not* necessarily imply a 'true self' as constituting the core of the individual, which is, then, in a self-performing act given an idealized and potentially 'inauthentic' expression. Rather, Rogers emphasizes the *process* of self-actualization, which aims at the reconciliation between the ideal version of oneself and one's actual behavior.

Goffman's approach counts as one of the 'grand theories' and is highly appreciated and recited since then. It seems, however, misread when taking an individualistic approach to the self, reducing the performance to a stage, in which the self *chooses* to put on a mask and play its part before others. In order to understand Goffman's theatrical metaphor in a way, which provides for illustrative depth and insight into social interaction, it seems crucial to apprehend Goffman's view on the self. To him the self:

> *...does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being*
> *generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by*
> *witnesses. A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a*
> *self to the performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a*
> *scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed*
> *character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental*
> *fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely*
> *from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern,*
> *is whether it will be credited or discredited.*
>
> (*The Goffman Reader*, ed. C. Lemert and A. Branaman, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997,
> pp. 23–24)

The theatrical metaphor emphasizes that the individual's establishment and conceptualization of a self is not only *dependent* on its context but that this 'self' constitutes a product of that context, that is, the scene at hand.

To conclude, the proposed theoretical criticism to studies conducted in the realm of self-presentation in online environments lies in the conflating of the theatrical performance of Goffman with the notion of an individualistic approach to the self. This leads to the conclusion of disguising the 'inner' or 'true' quality of the self for the sake of giving an inauthentic but potentially more valued presentation in the virtual space. Self-presentation as described by Goffman, then, is blurred with self-promotion as sharing content is considered an act of serving to create a certain online self which is potentially 'faked' or 'inauthentic'. The notion that social networks fosters inauthentic self-presentation, leads to the conclusion that it has isolating potential with the technology serving as a '*TechnoCocoon*' (Rosen, 2012) which mediates not what the individual 'truly is' but what he or she would like others to think of him or her.

In the following, I will propose an approach to the self, which is more in line with Goffman's view. In order to reinvestigate self-presentation in the online environment, I will introduce a socially constructed, narrated self. I will, then, return to Goffman's theatrical performance.

1.3 *A social constructivist approach to the self*

More than 20 years ago Kenneth J. Gergen already came to challenge the traditional beliefs on an 'inner' or 'true self'. From his social constructivist approach, Gergen emphasizes that

other than constituting an individual and rather private structure, the self has to be understood in terms of its relational character (1994). The self, then, forms a socially constructed entity, which is negotiated within its community. This relational view allows for the conceptualization of the self by means of social discourse. In even the most fleeting encounter, the vis-à-vis proffers a mirror for reflection through which one *is placed* and places him- or herself in the world. The social life can, then, be understood as networking selves in reciprocation since self-constructions can only continue to exist as long as they find the affirmation of the others playing a supportive role (1994; 2011).

In line with Gergen, narrative psychologist Michael White abandons the notion of an 'essential self' which was "to be found at the center of identity … independently of efforts to describe it" (2004, p.23). The individual holds personal preferences of how to constitute the self, which may, then, be reflected in his or her actions. A successfully established self-constitution, however, requires social acknowledgement. This can be achieved by *authenticating* the preferred identity claim. The notion of *authentication* is crucial here as it describes a *process* in which the individual has to negotiate his or her preferred claims about the self with others, rather than having an a-priori given authentic self, which he or she would like to present to others. The goal of the *authentication process*, then, is to constitute identity claims by which people can identify with their preferred ways of being.

From a philosophical account, which underlies the very psychological, the self can be understood as self-discovering and -constituting in interaction with its environment, as stated by Ciano Aydin (forthcoming). In order to establish a successful self-constitution, then, the individual strives for an authentication of the anticipated and preferred self.

Langellier states that by telling stories about one's life, a person performs his or her preferred identity (1989). Those preferred accounts or claims are, then, embedded within *self-narratives,* which are negotiated in social interaction in order to be authenticated. The idea of life narratives is closely related to the social constructivist approach to the self. An individual actively forms and reflects upon his or her life narratives in order to provide meaning and purpose to one's experience (Ochs&Capps, 2001). The human capability to self-reflect provides an instrument to distance oneself from the immediacy of one's existence and constitute narratives structured in meaningful entities (Bohlmeijer, 2007). The narratives construe a unique and continuous thread providing structure and meaning to one's experience. The narrative approach emphasizes that the realization of the present unfolds through reflecting upon the past as well as through the anticipation of the future. The individual is, thereby, enabled to conceive his or her life as composed of meaningful entities and, thus, to

locate and realize the self within a life story (Gergen, 1994). Yet again, the preservation of one's preferred self-narration is essentially dependent on the will of the other to admit and concede to the claim (Gergen, 1994).

The self is, then, formed within a context of subjective experiences brought into narrative form, shaped and negotiated upon in social interaction. By interacting with its environment the individual presents a self and strives for authentication of the preferred claims. The narratives, thereby, gain an audience to which the self-constituted stories are presented. Every narration of the self, then, implies a teller and an audience.

1.3.1 *Goffman in a social constructivist light*

When (re-)applying Goffman's theatrical metaphor to the conceptualization of the self as proposed above, one should not flatten its intention in solely focusing on the performing element. As stated above, the term performance "refer[s] to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers" (Goffman, 1956, p.13). In every encounter with its environment, the individual *inevitably expresses* him- or herself to an audience and interacts with partners in play (Ichheiser in Goffman, 1956). The actor's performance, then, gives "conclusive information" the audience or partner in play can draw on (Goffman, *Preface,* 1956). To a certain extend he or she exercises control over the impression, which the audience forms based on the overall performance. Goffman describes the dynamics as follows:

> *[The actor] may wish them to think highly of him, or to think that he thinks highly of them, or to perceive how in fact he feels toward them, or to obtain no clear-cut impression; he may wish to ensure sufficient harmony so that the interaction can be sustained, or to defraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, antagonize, or insult them. Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him."* (p.2)

The complexity of the presentation reveals when understanding its bi-directionality wherein multiple actors can interact with one another. The metaphorical dimension offers room for various implications within its figurative nature. The *authentication* of the self, as brought in above, finds itself in a dynamic process of reciprocal feedback between action of and reaction to the stage performance on hand.

Moreover, the entirety of the performance cannot be isolated from the setting, the scenery at hand, as the context provides for its operative range in presenting itself. The notion would imply that the dynamics of the self-constitution are not determined by the internal state conclusion but that they are rather highly dependent on the performance as *allowed for* by the scenery. The actors present, the possible themes of the given situation in which the self is placed, as well as the environment, then, constitute the scenery.

To draw further on the illustration, the set up of the stage can inter alia be characterized by the context as related to the socio-cultural environment the self is situated in. On one level of metaphorical understanding, one can, thus, trace back and analyze the presentation of the self as found within contemporary development, that is a mediation of the self via virtual environments such as online social networks.

1.3.2 *Facebook: another stage to self-presentation*

In order to take the reader with me in making way to understanding Goffman when applied to virtual environments, I would like to characterize the features of social networks, and Facebook in particular, to thereby reintroduce Goffman's theatrical metaphor.

Changes in societal character are invariably intertwined with the variety of available technologies. Their development - as experienced in contemporary Western society, has an exponential character which does not only imply changes in the interaction between human and machine but also induces cultural and societal changes in the interaction between humans. One of the technological developments, which may have shaped society the most within the last decades, is marked by the advent of the Internet and, thereby, the creation of what is often referred to as 'virtual reality'.

Along with the emergence of the public Internet in the 1970ties, a new quality of networking in the virtual space has been created. Virtual networking, as opposed to in-vivo networking - constituting a social network in interaction with an in-vivo community, has opened a pathway to new forms of communication mediated by various gadgets (smartphones, tablets, notebooks) and applications (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter). Thereby, the individual is provided with opportunities to communicate *via* what could be referred to as the 'virtual space'.

Statistics of Internet usage in Germany in the years between 2001 and 2013 reveal that the exploration of the virtual space experiences constant growth: whereas 37% of the total population in 2001 constitute the amount of Internet users in 2001, the percentage of users has increased to 76,5% in 2013 (de.statista.com). In 2014, furthermore, there were 55,6 million

Germans online, which result in an increase of 1,4 million compared to 2013 (ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de, 2014). In order to stress the notion that a significant shift to prolonged 'virtual experience' is taking place, it seems remarkable, that the average German Internet user spends 5,9 days per week *online* with 166 minutes (almost three hours) per day (ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de, 2014).

In, what could be called, the very beginning of the Internet era, the sociologist and professor of science, technology and society, Sherry Turkle, proposed an optimistic view on the opportunities the Internet provides for the individual to create and shape a 'second self' by means of using the computer (1995). The possibility to participate in identity transforming environments provided by online role-plays, chats and forums offered an explorative space of a new and auspicious kind, according to Turkle back then. The virtual space was considered an experimental laboratory without the social constraints and boundaries experienced in the 'real world' (p.10). The usage of pseudonyms, user- or nicknames was to safeguard one's anonymity and privacy. The individual, then, explores and expresses him- or herself in an anonymous space, which bears the opportunity to design even multiple self-realizations within the same realm.

A virtual platform where users can generate a personal profile, can link with other users of the same system and can share medial content (eg. photos), is provided by social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). The majority of the social networks require a bi-directional confirmation to get in contact with another user. Thereby, the user creates his or her own personal network composed of or assembling "friends", "followers", or "fans" (p.213) which also include so called "latent ties" as Haythornthwaite describes (2005).

Whereas the majority of the users of the first globally popular social network MySpace (launched 2003) used pseudonyms in order to protect their in-vivo identity, the social network Facebook (www.facebook.com; launched as corporate network in 2006) follows another policy. When creating an account to register, Facebook explicitly asks the user to give the full name, including fore- and surname as well as date of birth. The reasoning underlying this transparency claiming policy is that of protection against 'fake profiles', which could potentially harm other users (Lischka & Reißmann, 2012). This shift in online registering seems crucial here, as a virtual network is created in which a one-on-one synchronization with the 'real world' is aspired.

With the public launch of Facebook, the aspect of anonymity has crucially changed. The amount of users which give their consent to its policy by registering with their full name consciously or less consciously demonstrate their willingness to share their identity in the

virtual space by making it transparent to the viewer. It is a reflection of the fact that forfeiting anonymity and privacy is outweighed by the perceived benefits of participating in the social network. The experimental character of the Internet as described by Turkle, seems to have been removed. The user is confronted with shaping a virtual presentation of the self, which can by others be compared with the in-vivo person. The creation of an online profile, then, holds implications for the in-vivo presentation and vice versa. To point out, the clearly distinguished presentations of the in-vivo and virtual, back then, are by means of the transparency policy brought together more clearly and are in stronger interaction with one another.

Facebook has gained popularity in a sense that it is globally dispersed and used. Since its launch in 2006, it developed to one of the most used and popular concepts between the numerous social networks (Lischka & Reißmann, 2012). The amount of users in Germany between 2010 and 2014 has increased from 5,75 to 28 million. It seems noteworthy to give character to the network and put it into the context of self-presentation as brought in above.

Establishing a network between people, Facebook gives a platform with various applications. When creating a Facebook account the user, as far as the given template allows, establishes a 'personal' profile including personal data and photos. Within a clear template of structure the user can fill their profile with information about themselves and with what they like in categories such as books, films, sports, series, events. Facebook asks the user to write small entries (*posts*), and to share them on their timeline or the timeline of another user. Those posts can be filled in with places the person has been and also who they have been with. A person can be tagged in a photo, video or an entry whereby the photo or entry appears on their personal profile. Users can react to a post by 'leaving a comment'. Post and comment(s) constitute a *thread.* The user's timeline then constitutes a compilation of (chronologically dated) posts, photo's, threads and events. Furthermore, open and closed groups can be generated to communicate with others 'in private'. The functions and applications of the social network are polyglot.

The given template of Facebook provides every profile with a clear and transparent total overview of a 'virtual self', which can be 'inspected' and explored by others within minutes. The photos and videos create a multimedia visualization of the person, which can be backtracked in years. Papacharissi states that the created network forms an integral part of the self-presentation (2011). The user chooses from a "performance palette", as Papacharissi calls it, which can be identified as the setting for the presentation of the self (p.97)

An interesting aspect, it reveals, lies in the very *static* and at the same time *dynamic* character of the self-presentation. Compared to the in-vivo presentation, which is inherently *vivid*, the virtual presentation appears static in a sense that the user can actively give form and configure the communicated content about her or him and exercise control on a seemingly less spontaneous but 'designed self-presentation'. On the other hand, however, the virtual self-presentation undergoes a very dynamic process of configuration due to the fast linking with events, photos and connections with people as well as the bi-directionality of the communication. The social network provides the user with a "stage for […] interaction, linking the individual, separately or simultaneously, with multiple audiences" (Papacharissi, 2011, p.97) and thereby facilitate the self-presentation as a *static* construction but also makes it inherently complex due to its *dynamics*. From a narrative perspective, a post, then, constitutes a small narrative of the self, which is presented to an audience to be socially discussed or negotiated on, that is, being commented and 'liked'. The performing character again has to be considered not as masking or disguising the 'real self' but rather as aiming at a negotiation, and thereby authentication of the self.

Whereas in times without Internet, where there was *no* in-vivo presentation when there is *no* actual encounter, the self-presentation now seems extended to the virtual space[1]. It thereby, is exterior to the individual and likewise ever available. This seems to implicate changes in the dynamics of the self-presentation by making it faster and constantly available.

Contrary to earlier work reducing Facebook to a stage of self-performance serving one's self-promotion, I would like to propose that the person gains and loses control over its presentation at the same time, as it actively shapes its performance but also is subjugated to the dynamics, the sharing and communicating that happens independent of its participation.

The person can, to a certain extent, look at the self from the audience perspective and try to reconstruct how the self is perceived from that angle, that is, the specific audience. It can be proposed that mechanisms of comparing *expression* and *impression* are fostered here. This extended reflexivity of the self-presentation can be considered novel. One could, furthermore, argue, that *preferred identity claims*, which reflect in the self-presentation in order to authenticate them in social negotiation, are made transparent, interactively explorable, and provide for a new level of dynamics.

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[1] Clarke and Chalmers (1998) introduced the term of an 'Extended Self' mediated by technology such as a virtual platform. Their theory about '*The Extended Mind*' discusses whether one should consider the mind as bounded to the individual (the brain). They propose that the manifestation of an 'extended self' is experienced in the presentation as given on a virtual platform.

It has been pointed out that the stage or setting for the presentation of the self, undergoes inevitable and constant change, by taking place in both the real world in networks of social connections as well as the intertwining between a virtual and in-vivo presentation. Facebook, as one of the platforms for social connection and communication, provides the user with possibilities of narrating and communicating the self online, which merges with and shapes the offline self-presentation. In terms of the theatrical performance allegory, the virtual space created by Facebook could be referred to as a new multimedia 'high-tech' stage for the performance of the individual aiming at the authentication of the self. The performance's character is said to have become multi-facetted, static and dynamic, multi-mediated and complex.

1.4 *Adolescent e-users, social networking and life construction*
A survey carried out by German Federal Statistical Office in 2014 reveals that a proportion of 91% of the age group 16 to 24 years constitutes active users of online social networks, thereby, providing the largest proportion of social network users compared to other age groups (compare 67% of age group 10-15 years, 63% of age group 25-44 years). The adolescents can be referred to as a sophisticated generation of *e-users*.

This group, passing from childhood to early adulthood, seems particularly interesting also from a narrative and self-constitution perspective. Not only are adolescents, from our 21st century perspective, considered 'digital natives', who earlier and more thoroughly have become acquainted and made comfortable with the Internet compared to older generations. Furthermore, adolescence is identified as a period in which life construction plays a crucial role (Murray, 1985). Following Erikson's notion on *Identity and the life cycle* (1959)*,* during this rite of passage "[i]t is of great relevance to the young individual's identity formation that he be responded to, and be given function and status as a person whose gradual growth and transformation make sense to those who begin to make sense to him" (p.111). This period seems to be severely marked by the search for one's life path, social apprehension, and personal growth. The constitution of a self, then, seems to undergo an especially dynamic process of social negotiation as the adolescent passing from childhood to an adult can explore, dismiss, and (re-)identify with possible selves he or she displays within society. According to McAdams, this is as well to be explained by realizing that "[i]t is at this time in the human life course that people first explore ideological and occupational option available in society" (p.101) and that this period features social experimentation in which a niche is sought within the society (2001).

Given their more sophisticated interaction, on average, with virtual environments such as online social networks, the 'virtual stage' seems to play a crucial role to adolescents. The presentation of the self in the virtual environment can, then, be considered as deeply embedded in their everyday (social) life. It seems, therefore, interesting to investigate the stage related experience of their online self-presentation compared to the presentation of the self in the in-vivo environment.

1.5 *Purpose of this study and research question*

As proposed above, the major body of studies conducted on exploring self-presentation on online social networks follows an individualistic approach to the self. From revisiting Goffman's theatrical metaphor taking a social constructivist approach, it is the purpose of this study to reintroduce the question on how the presentation of the self in the virtual environment relates to the in-vivo self-presentation.

The constitution and social negotiation of the self, as has been pointed out, forms a crucial aspect of the rite of passage, that is, adolescence. Given their averagely high acquaintance with online social networks, it is worthwhile to focus on this group within society. Moreover, the presentation of the self can be approached as constituting a *phenomenal experience*, which consequentially holds inherent subjective features. In order to draw conclusions as to how they relate to the presentation of the self in the virtual environment as opposed to the in-vivo environment, it is the purpose of this study to follow a social constructivist approach in focusing on the social construction as to how they give meaning to it, that is, how they socially construct the presentation of the self in the virtual environment. The research question can, therefore, be formulated as follows:

How do adolescent e-users relate to the presentation of the self in virtual environment as compared to the presentation of the self in the in-vivo environment?

The self-presentation fulfills a function to the individual in constructing the self. The construction of the self undergoes social negotiation whereby preferred self-narratives are, then, sought to be authenticated. It is, therefore, valuable to investigate whether and how the *authentication process* is experienced to take place in the presentation of the self in the virtual environment according to the adolescent's perspective. The sub-question, as can be inherently integrated into the main question, can, therefore, be formulated as follows:

How is the authentication process of the self related to the online presentation of the self?

2 Method

2.1 Research design and method

In order to investigate *how adolescent e-users relate to the presentation of the self in virtual environments as compared to the presentation of the self in in-vivo environment,* an explorative study has been conducted applying focus group methodology. The set up, then, aims at prompting a self-presentational act in both environments as to elicit reflective potential for discussing the experience within a focus group context.

In order to provide for *ecological validity* in eliciting both self-presentational acts, the two conditions were embedded in a workshop frame on narrative futuring ('*Erzählen, wer ich sein werde*'), including two sessions of 'creative writing' and a 'group meeting'. The study, then, aims at a holistic approach, which focuses on the unique and personal range of experience of the researched.

2.1.1 *Sample selection*

As to account for a sample of adolescent e-users, the anticipated target group was aged 16 to 24. Although the age group considered appropriate to the term 'adolescence' culturally varies, the time span defining 'adolescence' in Europe usually includes the age group 16 to 24.

The number of participants considered appropriate for the constitution of a focus group usually lies between six and ten participants (Gibbs, 1997). This range was taken as benchmark for the recruitment of participants of the present study. Furthermore, an active Facebook account was taken as precondition to the participation in the study related workshop.

For the purpose of this study, it was aspired that the constellation of the focus group resembles the person's actual social network. A personal online social network created on Facebook is typically composed of a network of 'strong' and 'latent' (or weak) ties (Haythornthwaite, 2005) referred to as 'friends' relying on bi-directional confirmation. *Respondent-driven sampling* or *snowball sampling* method has been applied, that is, an involved subject is approached and asked to recruit potential participants from amongst their acquaintances. Thereby, an authentic 'micro-social network' was compiled which is sought to provide a reflection of a participant's actual social network.

A German female student aged 18 has been approached at a comprehensive school (*Gesamtschule*) in North Rhine Westphalia. Respondent-driven sampling, then, lead to an

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eventual sample of eight German adolescents aged 16 to 21, including one male and five female students attending college preparatory classes, as well as two male apprentices in the handcraft sector. For the three participants aged below 18, parental written informed consent was acquired.

2.1.2 *Eliciting presentations of the self*

The presentation of the self can be considered a performance given by an individual to an audience. Two conditions have been set up to prompt a self-presentation act both in the virtual as well as the in-vivo condition as means of priming for self-reflexion within the focus group meeting. The first condition, then, constitutes a self-presentation aimed at being shared on the online social network Facebook, the second is a self-presentation given in real life situation, thus, to an in-vivo public or audience. The self-presentational performance was induced by means of writing a *Letter from the Future*, a research instrument developed by Sools and Mooren (2012). At the Dutch Life-story lab of the University of Twente, which was founded by Ernst Bohlmeijer, Anneke M. Sools, and Gerben J. Westerhof in 2012 (www.utwente.nl/lifestorylab), *narrative futuring* is explored within the realm of narrative and positive psychology research as an approach to investigate mental health and well-being.

The participant is asked to imagine him- or herself at a freely chosen but *specific* time and *specific* place in the future. He or she is invited to mentally create a *specific* situation in which a positive outcome has occurred or a goal has been achieved. By taking the perspective of the future self, he or she, then, is to write a letter to his or her present self. The participant is also asked to include a message addressed at their present self.

The instructions for writing the *Letter from the Future* were attentively translated into German and similar in both conditions (see appendix A). In both virtual and in-vivo condition the letters were written within a time frame of 30 minutes.

2.1.2.1 *Presentation of the self in the virtual environment*

The survey software *Qualtrics* was used as platform to writing the first letter online as to set the 'virtual' condition. By inducing the belief that the letter will be shared on the social network Facebook, the participants were mentally attuned to present themselves to a virtual audience. Prior to writing the letter, the 'virtual' condition was introduced as follows: *"For the purpose of sharing your letter from the future with the other participants, a Facebook account has been created. Under your permission, your letter will be published on the time line of this Facebook profile. Subsequently to writing your personal letter, you can decide if*

you want to be tagged on the letter. It will, then, also appear on your personal Facebook timeline". The participants, thereby, were enabled to shape their personal letter as to what they want to present to the virtual audience. In order to not breach the participant's right to privacy, the participants were enabled to choose whether they would like to be tagged on their letter or not.

2.1.2.2 *Presentation of the self in the in-vivo environment*

For the purpose of the second, the 'in-vivo' condition, the participants were asked to write a letter from the future, which is supposed to be shared within the group meeting afterwards. Prior to writing the letter, the participants were informed that they will be asked to read the letter from the future aloud in front of the group. The participants, thereby, were enabled to shape their personal letter as to what they want to present to the in-vivo audience. The same instructions were handed to the participants as in the 'virtual' condition.

2.1.3 '*Erzählen, wer ich sein werde*': *set up Narrative Workshop*

A careful study design has been elaborated as embedded in a narrative workshop set up guided and conducted by the researcher. The participants were invited to take part in a workshop on narrative futuring titled '*Erzählen, wer ich sein werde*' (engl. 'Telling who I will become') at the University of Twente (see appendix B).

The set up of the workshop included two sessions of 'creative writing' (writing two letters from the future) as well as a group meeting including a group discussion. The participants were informed that the workshop is held within the framework of a research study in the field of narrative and positive psychology. Apart from guaranteeing *ecological validity* by providing an authentic setting for both conditions, the narrative workshop is considered a valuable personal experience to the participants.

The participants were informed that they are allowed to leave the workshop at any time for any reason without providing an explanation.

2.1.4 *Eliciting reflection: Focus Group Methodology*

The participants took part in a qualitative focus group discussion framed within the narrative workshop wherein the participants were asked to reflect on their experience of writing the two letters. The conditions, then, are understood as crucial to eliciting a discussion on the participants' *own, personal* and *unique* experience of the self-presentational act. Not

disguising the research purpose, then, was to prevent the research focus to influence the content shared within the group.

As a form of group interviewing, the focus group method aims at generating "interaction within the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher" (Gibbs, 1997). The interaction provides the researcher with insight into subjective experiences and perspectives of the participants. The group, then, generates a dynamic of its own providing for an authentic reflection of the participants' opinion, thoughts, and ideas. The interaction is, moreover, believed to produce "something that is not reducible to individual members" (Morgan, 1997).

As the group of the present study constitutes a social network of strong and latent ties, furthermore, the quality of the focus group, here, lies in the participant not feeling unfamiliar or even threatening to each other. It is believed that this serves social interaction, openness and the creation of a natural setting within the frame of a guided group conversation. Social distress or constraints due to talking to strangers, which is considered to potentially discourage the focus group to flourish in their conversation, is diminished.

Several ground rules were established and introduced to the group so as to provide for a non-threatening environment (Krueger, 1994) as well as with regard to confidentiality and respect for the thoughts and ideas of others.

Sensitizing concepts were used by the moderator to guide the conversation. Those included themes covering the experience of writing the letter in both conditions, online social networks in general, as well as Facebook appearance, in particular. The moderator opened and maintained the focus group conversation with the following questions:

> *Q1: How did you experience writing the first letter, which was said to be shared on Facebook?*
>
> *Q2: How did you experience writing the second letter, which you know, will be read aloud to the group?*

The development of the group conversation was given to the natural flow of the discussion. The moderator did only interfere in cases in which a discussed theme was believed to be saturated, for paraphrasing or inquiring into expressed ideas and thoughts.

The focus group conversation was audio taped for the purpose of analysis only.

2.1.5 *Procedure*

The participants were invited to take part in a workshop on narrative futuring '*Erzählen, wer ich sein werde*' at the University of Twente. Prior to confirming attendance the participants (and parental authority respectively) were informed about what to expect from the workshop, the matter of confidentiality and their right to stay anonymous. Further, they are informed that they have the right to withdraw from the workshop and/or the study at any time for any reason without having to give explanation.

The date of the workshop was set on 29 April 2015 and took place at Vrijhof, University of Twente. The researcher proceeded as follows: First, an introduction was given to the participants including the workshop schedule. Each participant was, then, assigned to a computer for the 'virtual' condition, '*session 1'*. The participants were led through the application via *Qualtrics* and received a time frame of 30 minutes to write the first letter. Subsequently, a break of 1,5h was scheduled in order for the participants to be able to distance themselves from writing the first letter. *Session 2* was introduced by asking the participants to write a second letter. Subsequently, every participant read his or her letter aloud to the group. The focus group discussion was, then, introduced. The time frame scheduled for the group discussion was 45 minutes. Finally, a debriefing was given to the participants about the purpose of the study. Workshop or study related questioned were thoroughly responded to.

2.2 *Data analysis*

The focus group audit trail served as fundamental unit of analysis. The audit trail was transcribed including pauses, informal side remarks made by the participants, as well as distinctive behavior such as 'shared laughs'. All names have been altered to preserve the participants privacy.

A thematic analysis has been applied in order to analyze the content of the group discussion. Via *open coding* common themes emerging from the group discussion were identified, providing for initial concepts which account for the experienced relation to the presentation of the self in the virtual environment as opposed to the in-vivo environment. Central *key words,* as brought in by the participants, were assigned to each theme and served the analytic coding.

In a process of *axial coding* the concepts were reviewed as to cover for all themes mentioned within the group discussion. Furthermore, the themes were evaluated based on weight and prominence as ascribed to by the participants. A careful *iterative process* of

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transcript inspection, analysis and synthesis has been applied which served to shape the themes in order to find meaningful entities reflecting the group discussion. All relevant extracts from the group conversation were given initial labels. Non-relevant extracts were identified and assigned to the label 'Others'. The themes are *mutually non-exclusive* in a sense that significant overlapping was identified between them, which highlights their content-related interconnectedness also included in the results. Each of the themes, then, contributes a meaningful perspective to what was important to the group.

The sub question on *how the authentication process of the self is related to the virtual presentation of the self* serves to specify the analysis of the central research question, the adolescents' experienced relation to the presentation of the self in the virtual environment. By means of the presentation of the self, preferred self-narratives are communicated and can be socially negotiated on. Preferred self-constitutions are, then, sought to be socially acknowledged and, thereby, *authenticated* in a process of social discourse. As the adolescent e-users constitute both *actors* and audience in the presentation of the self in the virtual and the in-vivo environment, I will further analyze, how each theme related experience serves the *authentication process* according to the adolescents ranging from fostering the process to impeding it. For this purpose, the social negotiability and the social acknowledgement of the presentation of the self in the virtual environment are investigated based on the adolescents' experience. The findings related to the sub-question are appended to the findings of each theme presented in the results.

Moreover, in order to provide an integrated representation of the results acquired a model was constructed. The identified themes, the sub-question as well as the model, then, provide an exploration related to the central research question.

All extracts taken from the group discussion were carefully translated into English including informal language and slang to achieve appropriate rephrasing of the expressed thought.

3 Results

3.1 *Thematic analysis*

Emanating from the analysis of the focus group discussion, four non-exclusive themes have been identified covering for the central themes mentioned during the focus group discussion. All themes, then, relate to the participants' experience of the presentation of the self in the

virtual environment as opposed to the in-vivo environment. The themes have been labeled as follows: *(il)legitimate isolation* (I.), *controllability* (II.), *realness and make-beliefs* (III.), *sharing and echoing* (IV.). Extracts considered as less relevant to the analysis are included in the last paragraph labeled '*Others*'.

In the following, each theme will be given form, supplemented by illustrative extracts taken from the focus group conversation.

I.   (Il)legitimate isolation

The first theme covers a range of discussed thoughts on what could be referred to as an 'isolative potential' the *virtual* environment holds to the group as they present themselves to others in the in-vivo environment. Evaluating the experienced isolation from the in-vivo environment, the participants concordantly rated it 'unacceptable' or *illegitimate* as, to them, 'going virtual' contributes to social exclusion of others within the in-vivo environment. In the course of the conversation, however, a legitimation of the 'virtual' isolation as means of 'self-protection' was discussed. Key words linking to the identification of the theme included terms such as 'encapsulating', 'building a wall', 'excluding themselves', 'alone', 'distancing'.

Illegitimate isolation, discussed on two occasions, refers to the experienced social exclusion of others in the in-vivo environment. Others, who use their mobile phones for social networking 'on the go' were, then, thought to encapsulate themselves from their in-vivo environment. The isolation makes them no longer available to their peers - a behavior, which the group concordantly deprecates:

> Aaron: *There are particularly those pictures, or people in general, they are, then, sitting in a café… and they are sitting there with their mobile phones … the people … the whole time, and they are in a group and they are supposed to do something* together *and they should actually make conversation.*
> Susan: *Yes, they are encapsulating themselves.*
> Madeleine: *Yes, they are building a wall around them* (154-162)

From the participants' outside perspective referring to "them*"* who isolate from the peers, the behavior seems rather *illegitimate*. Its implications are constructed by the group as undesirable and rather anti-social. On another occasion Anna brings in:

> *"When I see, now, children in the bus, for example … and there are two friends and one of them has a mobile phone and the other doesn't and the one has to look at it all the time … then I find*

> *it excluding, yes, I find it, maybe they don't care about it, but I think for the guy who does not have a mobile phone, it is rather stupid."* (363-368)

In the following, however, a legitimization of the isolation was discussed, which naturally developed throughout the conversation. Madeleine adds to the discussion *"ok, yes, I have to say, I do that as well. Yes, in that very moment I just don't want to make conversation"* (163). The legitimization of purposively isolating themselves, then, lies in the prevention of feeling obligated to communicate. This is thought to be achieved by making others believe that one is "preoccupied" rather than "alone". The group further explored:

> *Madeleine: And, then, so many groups are around me and I am all on my own and then it looks like I don't have friends and, what do I know, what they might think of me…*
> *Aaron: Yeah, like… "why is she looking around like that"?*
> *Madeleine: …and, then, I grab my mobile phone and, eh, text with somebody and, then, eh, the others think like "o she is preoccupied". Yeah, that's what you think, then."* (176-181)

Sharon defines this behavior as *displacement behavior*, an "Übersprungshandlung", which could be literally translated as a 'transit-jump action'. The term used here originally stems from Konrad Lorenz instinct theory and describes the 'transit' behavior displayed by animals in between two opposite instinctive actions, which lacks actual purpose. In the given context, Sharon uses this term to describe an action to 'skip' a certain social encounter she seeks to, thereby, avoid. It seems interesting that a 'jumping' action is used to define the action. Sharon further explicates the 'Übersprungshandlung' as follows:

> *"… then you think, yes, I just walk there and look on my mobile phone and then I don't have to say 'hello' [to others], for example, then this for example is a displacement action* [Übersprungshandlung] *… that you grab your mobile phone and that you say, um, "I am preoccupied""* (188-195)

Following the image, here, the desired action seems to require a 'jump' greater than 'going through' the situation. The virtual and in-vivo environment are experienced as distinctly separated from each other. 'Going virtual', then, can serve as shaping a desired self-presentation in the in-vivo environment.

The line between *illegitimate* and *legitimate* isolation seems rather clear-cut to the group, as is their normative judgment on the behavior: the group distinguishes between situations in which a group of friends comes together (conversation is desirable) and

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situations in which one is 'alone' and wants to avoid social interaction with the in-vivo environment:

> Susan: "Yes exactly. When you are on the bus, then you notice, that you encapsulate yourself. On the bus, this gives you a better feeling. In a group, then, it doesn't."

As also described by Madeleine, the participants seem to self-protect against what they consider a potentially negative judgment that is, 'seeming un-preoccupied'. The protection is achieved by 'going virtual'. The engagement with a virtual audience, then, offers a desired self-presentation in the in-vivo environment, thus, functioning as a tool to shape the in-vivo self-presentation.

Rather contrasting at first, however, it is also discussed how one is to protect the in-vivo person by precisely *avoiding the virtual.* During the focus group conversation a consensus was found stating that, to a certain extend, the 'exposure' of one's life in the virtual environment 'has to know limits'. When discussing the first letter, which was supposed to be posted online, the group stated that they do not want to reveal "too private things, only superficial [things]" (Susan, 8):

> Susan: Right?
> Emanuel: Yeah, you don't want to appear odd ...because everyone *can read it*
> Madeleine: It's just ... inconvenient…
> Susan: What the others [participants] think… I don't care but you shouldn't get too *private.*
> (8- 14)

Within the group, the idea that the in-vivo person is to be protected by *avoiding the virtual* is strongly expressed by two of the participants:

> Emanuel: I just have my life, this is my *life, and I don't have to show it to everyone!*
> Daniel: Yes, it's none of their *business!* (92-93)

The protective potential of *isolating by 'avoiding the virtual'* offers another approach to the virtual presentation of the self. The perceived exposure of the self in the virtual environment, then, is dismissed for the sake of protecting the in-vivo self-presentation.

With regard to the research question, three findings derive from this topic. First, 'going virtual' gives an undesirable or illegitimate in-vivo self-presentation, that is, being rather anti-social and encapsulating and, thereby, lacks social acknowledgement (1). The

encapsulation, however, serves a desired in-vivo self-presentation, in which one appears 'preoccupied' and 'not alone', which is supposed to protect against anticipated negative judgment from others (2). Third, the virtual self-presentation is, to a certain extent, said to be avoided for the sake of one's in-vivo presentation in order to not disguise private matters (3). The third finding, in particular, is related to the second theme, that is exercising purposive control on the virtual self-presentation.

Related to the sub-question, it can be stated that by encapsulating via going virtual an *authentication process* in the in-vivo environment seems rather impeded: there is no social acknowledgement to the isolation as it is experienced as serving social exclusion (1). The presentation of the self in the in-vivo environment, then, holds a desire to *authenticate* that 'one has friends', is 'preoccupied' and 'not alone' (2). This, however, serves relational segregation and creates a distance between the one presenting him- or herself, the 'actor', and the 'audience' (1).

II.   *Controllability*

The second central theme identified concerns the *controllability* the self-presentation is experienced to provide within the virtual environment as opposed to the in-vivo self-presentation. Key terms, the coding refers to, include terms such as 'control', 'calculated', 'deciding', 'checking' versus 'rather spontaneous', 'engaging with the situation', 'loss of opportunities'.

According to the participants, the virtual self-presentation acquires a controlled selection and reviewing of the narratives which are posted and thereby shared with others. When asked about the experience of writing the first letter (supposed to be posted on Facebook) the group discussed whether they had written the letter at all if they had had no choice but to be tagged on their letter.

> *Susan: Rather inconvenient, right?*
> *Sharon: I wouldn't have done it in the first place.*
> *Madeleine: No, me neither.*
> *Sharon: I would have said: I'm ready to sit here but ... (laughing)*
> *Madeleine: No I wouldn't have liked that, because this in some way is.. or rather.. acquaintances ... they could read it all and, yes, you, also, you have to check, what and how you write something and, then, also only having an hour to write something, ehm, and you, then, may have grammar mistakes included or I don't know. And that could have consequences for*

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the future, if, well, the managers take a look, what one has on his profile, because.. that's what
they do. Yes, before they hire you. No. Well, I don't….
Susan: It really is, that I think, 'how would someone else read this?'"
Madeleine: You really have to check… (39-49)

On the one hand, the participants seem to experience that they have to exercise deliberate and careful control over their virtual self-presentation. On the other hand, there is control exercised *over* them as they feel that others 'monitor' their postings. The participants are aware of the fact that the postings are lasting and, therefore, ever available to the (virtual) audience. Further, some posts are experienced as slightly shameful as they fail to correspond with their present preferred self:

> *Aaron: when you post things on Facebook and two or three years later you look at it and they*
> *are still there, then you think, bugger me, what a crap have I written back then* (all laughing)
> (232-234)

It is, then, that they reflect upon past postings they would not subscribe to *now* but which still constitute a self-presentation to others checking their profile. Therefore, it is perceived that more control has to be exercised over what is presented to the virtual environment.

The participants feel that others make a purposive selection as to what they will present to others online.

> *Emanuel: I find that the people on Internet always try to present themselves in a better way.*
> *Well, there are rarely posts, where somebody says: "Well, I am really having a hard time*
> *now", those are there, but those are rare, they rather share the stuff that is good. When*
> *they're on vacation, or something, I don't know, when they do something great. Not like, "I'm*
> *sitting in the corner of my room and I'm feeling so bad".* (76-81)

Overall, there is a negative connotation related to the aspect of having the control to edit and shape the presentation of the self, which is shared.

> *Aaron (*speaking sarcastically, with a negative tone*): And then, it is just, that you* control*, what*
> *you check and what you don't check, or in general, that you control with whom you are having*
> *contact or not.* (197-199)

The implications of exercising control were discussed, which led the group to conclude that a "*spontaneous engagement with the situation*" (Aaron, 205), as is related to the in-vivo

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environment, is experienced as rather impeded. A clear-cut distinction is made between the virtual self-presentation in which a social network is purposively 'generated' (contacts are made based on bi-directional affirmation of a *'friend invitation')* opposed to a rather unprompted encounter with someone in the in-vivo environment. A consensus was found in the idea that 'personal development' of the participants had led them to the conclusion that the latter is superior to its 'prompted' and 'controlled' virtual counterpart.

> *Aaron: I find that most of the encounters, well, those which hold something positive for you, from which you can take something, happen rather by chance anyway. Those you just don't control. 'Cause you can decide on Facebook, who can contact you at all, or with whom you text... then you just lose the opportunity, well, to engage with a situation, that you haven't calculated beforehand*
> *Emanuel: I agree.*
> *Sharon: Yes.* (199-205)

Although purposive shaping of one's self-presentation is enabled in the virtual environment a rather unprompted, arising encounter is experienced as potentially more meaningful, opening the 'opportunity' to let oneself into an emerging situation.

Regarding the research question, then, the participants experience that the self-presentation in the virtual environment, on the one hand, *requires* more deliberate control than the in-vivo environment in order to give a desired self-presentation, especially as they feel that others are monitoring their postings (1). On the other hand, the virtual presentation of the self *allows* for more editing by exercising control over shared content and the communication by which one engages with others, thereby, lacking positive spontaneous encounter (2). The group shares the thought, that the immediate, spontaneous encounter holds more opportunity, as it is potentially more meaningful and less 'calculated'.

With regard to the sub-question*,* the analysis of the given theme reveals that due to the *controllability* the presentation of the self in virtual environments demands, it is felt that the *process* by which authentication takes shape via *dynamic* social negotiation, is rather detained. Positive, rather 'uncontrolled' in-vivo encounter is felt to serve the process of authentication whereas the *effort,* by which the virtual presentation is believed to be shaped, lacks socially acknowledgement (2). As the consequences or full scope of the reactions of the virtual audience cannot be anticipated, it is felt that more control has to be exercised in order for the presentation to be appropriate. Spontaneous in-vivo encounter, then, provides for more

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engagement with the situation, which allows for both 'actor' and audience to *actively* engage process of authentication (1).

Finally, the notion that control is exercised in order to shape the preferred presentation of the self in the virtual environment, opens up another theme dealing with the experience of *realness and make-beliefs* regarding the self-presentation online.

III.   Realness and make-beliefs

A third theme was identified relating to the perception of *realness and make-beliefs*. This theme reveals a perceived and clear-cut dichotomy between a perceived "real world", "real friends", "real life", "real contact", opposed to the virtual environment provided by Facebook. The control, which can be exercised on Facebook, then, is perceived as potentially make-belief. Key words, which are related to the third theme, include terms such as 'real' and 'true', which find constant repetition throughout the conversation as well as 'normal' and 'pretending'. Madeleine states that reading aloud the second letter felt more intimidating to her than posting a letter online "*because here [she has]* real people *in front of [her]*" which highlights the distinction they make between both environments.

Relating to Emanuel's notion that people 'rather share the stuff that is good', the participants agree on Madeleine saying:

> *"Yes, there are always different people. Well, on the one hand, there is the sort people, which pretend to be something, which they're not ..."* (84-85)

To all participants 'pretending to be someone' plays a central role to the perceived credibility of presenting the self on the virtual platform. Madeleine, on another occasion, describes an incident in which she was approached by someone interested in her:

> *Madeleine: Once I was texting with a guy, well, he was part of our circle of friends and he seemed to like me a little, well, that's what I heard from the others, and eh the others helped him with what he should text. Yeah, then I thought, eh get away from me!* (392-395)

As Madeleine found out that it was not 'really' him who texted her as others texted *for* him, she disrespected his behavior and pushed him away.

Further, the group experiences that using emoticons cannot provide them with a feedback, which they feel they can really rely on. The credibility of the conveyed 'emotions' are, then, doubted as they fail to reflect the reality.

> *Dennis: But with texting those emoticons, when you think like in normal, with these smileys, that's just far too much.* (390-391)

Furthermore, as they know themself sometimes reacting in a socially desired way to others online, they draw an inference by consequentially doubting the credibility of others to give them 'true' feedback:

> *Aaron: You can use those emoticons, but you don't know, if the other one really feels like that. When he sends a heart, you don't know whether he is laughing. I am also like that, you write something funny and then you don't want to be mean and you give him that smiley, although you sit there and you think, yes, it wasn't that funny.*
> *Madeleine: Yes, I write that just like that and don't think it.* (380 - 385)

The topic is further explored, when the group discusses that giving affirmation to a post of someone (via 'likes') can turn out to be *intended* to only serve the person itself:

> *Emanuel: I find, they do that often now... so superficial, well, like being on a 'like tour', but you see, it is always the same guys and they just 'like' everything, they hope then, if they 'like' others, then the others have to 'like' them back* (302-304)

Rather then giving 'true' affirmation to someone, reacting to a post can, from their perspective, be referred to as an action, by which one seeks for reciprocated affirmation. This behavior is, then, rather dismissed and seen as 'superficial'.

A strong tendency towards a deprecation of perceived *make-beliefs* was observed within the focus group. However, referring to their own behavior, there were also comments countering the depreciation:

> *Sharon: In real they don't have anything, well, in the real life...*
> *Madeleine: ..that does not have to be...*
> *Sharon: Yes, it does. There are for example those people, they are, for example, very active on the Internet, and that those are the ones, who in real life don't have anybody.* (70-74)
> [...]
> *Aaron: I also never, well, when I, let's say, posted something back then, I didn't totally* exaggerate *situations, well, that was, in some ways, how it indeed felt. When I felt good, I felt good, when I felt bad, I felt bad.* (125-127)

As has been stated earlier, the preferred self Sharon says to intend to convey is to seem 'preoccupied' and 'having friends'. Here, however, she states that those who are 'active on the Internet … are the ones' who are actually 'alone'. Madeleine throws into the group that

this "doesn't have to be [the case]", a view, which is acknowledged by Aaron. "In some ways", he "shared it the way he felt it", which is contrary to the belief that they purposeful 'deceive' in order to shape a desired self-presentation. It fails, nevertheless, to receive social acknowledgement from the group, or audience of the presentation.

The reactions to posts shared on Facebook are, further, perceived as un-realistic compared to reactions one would receive in the in-vivo environment for yet another reason shared in the focus group conversation, that is, that it exceeds 'real' or 'realistic' reactions: Whereas in the virtual environment several 'mundane events' shared with others do receive comments, the same in-vivo self-presentation would not receive this feedback. The virtual self-presentation, in this regard, is perceived as not serving their authentication as, to them, it fails to resemble reactions likely to be received in the "real world".

> Aaron: Nobody would say anything about it when you'd tell someone, "Jo, I am going to the toilet". Yes, go! But get off my back! (all laughing) But on Facebook it is something else… (129-131)

In making the distinction between virtual and 'real', the participants strongly favor the latter. It is felt, that a "real contact" including touching and actually seeing the other person cannot be replaced by virtual contact making.

> Aaron: You just lose the feeling for the real life, like, to touch somebody and to look at him, when you're talking to him.
> Madeleine: Yes, just the real contact (151-153)

It is felt that something crucial is lost regarding the communication in the virtual environment, that is, realistic reactions and a sense of credibility to what is presented. The group agrees that a certain development has taken place which offered the realization that "it is much more beautiful to tell them in *real*" (Sharon) which also relates to the last theme.

Conclusively, it can be stated that the presentation of the self in the virtual environment is experienced as holding much more potential to constitute purposeful 'make-beliefs'. It is felt, that a synchrony between the virtual and the in-vivo communication is rather lacking. The relational character of the virtual presentation is, then, perceived as 'unreal' or more artificial as opposed to the in-vivo presentation.

With regard to the sub-question, it can be stated that to the participants 'realness' is crucial, that is, for the social interaction to be at least in line with the in-vivo interaction, in order to serve the self-constitution. The feeling that others 'give likes' to only mutually be

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'liked back' as well as the experience that one is mislead by others texting for someone, a sincere basis for a process in which one can authenticate a self is missing. Further, drawing on the findings of the first theme, it is felt that 'in the real world they don't have anything, which implies that the preferred self, that is, seeming 'preoccupied' and 'having friends' fails to be authenticated as the group doubts its credibility. It, then, lacks social acknowledgement from 'the audience', the preferred claim is presented to.

IV.   *Sharing and echoing*

The aspect of how, what, and with whom to *share,* was thoroughly explored within the group conversation and a clear-cut comparison was made between sharing in the virtual environment opposed to sharing in what is called the 'real world'. The self is negotiated on in the interaction in either virtual or in-vivo environment by means of *communication*. Taken from its Latin origin, 'communicare' means 'to share'. In this context, this fact is to be highlighted.

The term *echoing*, then, refers to the feedback or reaction the *sharer* receives from the other the communication is directed at. Bat echolocation provides a useful metaphor here: the bat produces ultrasonic sounds in order to receive returning echoes from the surrounding. Thereby, it can locate itself within that environment. Dependent on the very subject or object the sound wave is directed at, the returning echo reflects the outgoing pulse but holds unique characteristics of the one or the thing 'sending it back'. The comparison seems adequate and useful here: whenever communication takes place, virtual as in-vivo, the teller *communicates to* an audience with the purpose of receiving a (non-verbal or verbal) reaction or feedback. The quality of the returning echo is, then, dependent on the other, which receives the communication. It, then, holds the characteristics of what was communicated beforehand. Characterizing the returning echo or feedback in the virtual compared to the in-vivo environment gives insight to how differences are perceived. Key terms of this theme include 'sharing', 'communicate', 'likes' and 'contact'.

On the one hand, it is discussed, that sharing in the virtual environment via Facebook gives opportunity to stay connected with people one would otherwise lose contact with. Virtual sharing is, then, seen as potentially socially bonding, especially with family members living apart from each other. The presentation of the self in the virtual environment as means of staying in contact and sharing experiences becomes a useful tool where no in-vivo encounter is possible. On the other hand, however, it is criticized that direct in-vivo

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communication seems rather replaced for the worse, when all family members have a Facebook account and share and communicate *only* via that medium. As mentioned above, communicating online is seen as inferior as it lacks actual encounter:

> *Anna: You, let's say, stay in contact with the people. This I find good about Facebook.*
> *Aaron: This is, when it's good, but you can also have the opposite. There are families, in which every family member has a Facebook account, and they actually* only *communicate via this instead of really talking to each other. Instead of talking to the family member, for example, if it's the daughter. This is very strange, well, personally find it hard to imagine for myself.*
> *...*
> *Aaron: you are in your family and you are in one house, you cross each other, like, you could share the information right then or try ... back then you called, you get someone on the telephone, then you actually talked to people instead of just sending messages.* (138-149)

Furthermore, sharing in the virtual environment holds other *means* than the in-vivo environment of *echoing* to the group. On Facebook, the group explores, emoticons are used to express feelings whereas 'likes' serve as giving affirmation, thus positive echoing, to what has been shared. Nevertheless, as explained earlier, the group utters their concerns about the credibility of receiving the affirmative echoing of the people reacting to the shared content. When doubting the credibility of the shared presentation of the self, the desired echoing does not take place. Simultaneously, sharing in the virtual environment is withheld when the echoing is considered inadequate or even missing:

> *Madeleine: That's also because of the 'likes', like you said before. Back then, you really got a lot [of likes] and now you don't get any, well, I think that's why, well, as you said, as if they were thinking, 'I don't get likes, that's so embarrassing, so I better don't [share] at all.* (250-254)

Not receiving 'comments' or 'likes' to what is shared is experienced as undesirable. It lacks echoing, then, which is even considered "embarrassing". On another occasion, the insufficiency of the virtual echoing to the online self-presentation is further explored:

> *Emanuel: I find ... you can read it out of it, well, out of the style of writing when she replies. When somebody texts "????", yes then you think, better drop the whole thing, you may not know the person but you can imagine, she is a little like a control freak .. or she is a little ...*

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> *Daniel: Yeah, well, for example, I think of it now, well, when I am texting with a girl, and I send her like three or four sentences and then she only replies with a 'haha' or simply a smiley, then I get tired of it, because I know, yes, the person gives a word I cannot do anything with it* (403-414)

Here, the participants describe a situation in which the virtual presentation of the self initiated by the participants, is experienced as insufficiently replied to. Emanuel describes how he 'reads out' of the style of writing and draws his conclusion from it. As verbal exchange, facial expressions, and gestures are not available, they try to read into the texted words. Aaron, compares the in-vivo encounter to it, which he says to strongly prefer, as it provides direct and bodily feedback:

> *"I find, that this by all means is inherent to a* conversation*, that you* see*, when the other is* talking *to you and I find when texting, then,* it *simply isn't conveyed like this."* (377-379)

The experienced insufficiency related to both sharing and echoing might seem rather contrary to what has been earlier stated referring to the discussion on how the virtual environment fosters expendable sharing of 'irrelevant' content. Aaron shares the experience:

> *"The strange thing about it is, then they make a comment,* because *people really think: I have to say something about it."* (118-120)

He refers to irrelevant posts people feel urged to react to. Further, he states that some people "just have such a huge urge to communicate, those are probably the one who post the most on Facebook" (229). On yet another occasion, he literally calls this a "coercion to exhibitionism" (97). What seems worthwhile mentioning here, is that, 'exhibitionism' originally refers to an *inner* drive a person feels to exhibit him- or herself in front of others. The participant, however, refers to being *forced,* that is, being externally obliged to expose the self in the virtual environment.

> *Aaron: This hasn't been there before, this coercion to exhibitionism, I would almost call it ...*
> *Susan (speaking in background): Yeah, you don't get something out of it.*
> *Aaron: ... well, so you have this profile, which says certain things about you, but most of the things you don't have to know about that someone.* (97-101)

The virtual sharing of self-related content is concordantly considered to provide for 'too much' irrelevant sharing. It can be stated that the participants experience that more content is shared than that desired echoing is provided due to the abundance and irrelevancy of the content being shared. Simultaneously, they experience the sharing as insufficient as lacking 'real verbal exchange'.

Yet again, the group contrasts past and present experiences:

Anna: This has totally changed, that Facebook isn't that anymore ... where you get likes and then you feel good (316-317)

It reveals that the meaningfulness of sharing and echoing within the virtual environment, thereby, has forfeited to them. The general tenor within the group, then, was that the virtual presentation of the self could not provide them with meaning as it did in the past:

Aaron: Back then, it was like, you thought ...

Anna: ... yes, it would be 'coool'... (laughing)

Aaron: Yes, in a certain age you think, you are cool and it is important, that other people know, what you're doing in that very moment [....]

Moderator: Why do you think you do it?

Aaron: I think uhm that is...

Madeleine: [To get] Attention

Aaron: ... no. You then feel a little good, when you know, I belong to that superordinate group, and you are not alone, so to speak. You don't have the feeling of being alone. You always have the feeling, that somebody is there, who will then respond or 'likes' it and then you think, yes, you think, yes, he is thinking about me within this short time or something.

Sharon: Yes, and the people then feel cool when they have 500 likes…

(51 – 70)

To what they refer to as 'back then', without specifying, Facebook provided their experiences with meaning. They experienced it as "cool' and "important" to share mundane events. Whereas the notion of 'seeking attention' seems rather being drowned here, it reveals that the experience was believed to be meaningful when heard and responded to. Also the feeling of 'belonging' and 'not being alone' reflects that the social network at least was ascribed meaning to as it connects and communicates, that is, offers opportunity to present the self in the virtual environment on Facebook.

On several occasions throughout the conversation, the participants said to have realized that "you get nothing out of it anyway" (Susan, 98), and they have "learned that it is all about completely different things" (Anna, 269). To them, this is related to becoming older and thereby more mature:

> Aaron: Well, if you think about it, the older you become… the older you become, you actually realize, how dumb it is, that you don't have to disclose yourself every minute." (53-55)

Aaron added that texting, communicating via online social networks, "is only of secondary importance" (108), that is, it constitutes an inferior replacement. This is to be related to the insufficiency of the virtual presentation, lacking real physical encounter. This 'realization' they already had, then, was explored as to what 'really' is important to them, not as a distinct theme but as brought in throughout the conversation:

> Madeleine: The older we become the more you want to be by yourself and that the other person finds out about you and that you don't want to expose yourself like that.

It seems remarkable that on four occasions, it was concluded by the participants that Facebook has become 'expendable' or 'redundant' (Susan, 133; Sharon, 245; Madeleine, 320; Aaron 467). The group concordantly states, that it has lost its appeal to them and that it has been replaced. Two narratives appear here: on the one hand, it is reasoned that change occurred due to available alternatives, that is other technological applications such as WhatsApp and SnapChat which have become more popular. On the other hand, however, they argue that sharing is considered insufficient, redundant and inferior to the in-vivo encounter:

> Sharon: Especially… that was really cool, I looked at it again. Back then, when people… then you always posted on Facebook, when you were somewhere, well, had a good day … then you always received like 30 Likes or something and when you do it today, then the people just think: "why are you doing this?" Because by now it has become expendable, because although the people have more technology, they have become aware, that it doesn't really give you anything, to share it with the whole world or to just virtually share it with friends, but that it is much greater [schöner], to tell them in real (241-249)

Sharing in the virtual world, then, is experienced as having lost its meaningfulness and purpose. It is experienced that meaningful encounters which hold 'something positive' take

place in the in-vivo environment. As Aaron states, "some moments just don't belong there" (29).

Regarding the research question, the last theme points out that the virtual environment, 'back then', fulfilled a need to communicate and served as means to share and receive echo within one's social environment. It provided a feeling of belonging and that one's experience is meaningful (1). The group, however, experienced a transition in ascribing meaning to the presentation of the self in the virtual environment (2). Although still used to communicate with people one would otherwise lose contact with, the group says to experience a lack of meaningfulness regarding the virtual sharing and echoing as it has become excessive, redundant and unreliable to them.

With regard to the sub-question, it can be stated that a process of *meaning making* underlies and forms a necessary condition to the *authentication* of a desired self-constitution. The meaning making process, then, involves a dynamic interaction between sharing one's outlined selves with the audience and receiving echo, or direct feedback. Only if the communication is rendered meaningful it can contribute to the authentication. 'By now', the group experiences the virtual environment as insufficient for meaningful sharing. 'Being forced' into communication and sharing is considered at odds with a process of authentication one takes purposive and willed part in. Further, as has been stated, the credibility of both shared content as well as reactions, echoes, to one's presentation of content is doubted. Authentication of preferred self-constitutions is, therefore, experienced as impeded as the virtual environment fails to fulfill its original purpose.

Other

During the group discussion, more interesting themes have been discussed as naturally emerging from the conversation. They have been labeled less relevant or representative for the analysis. Those extracts included a cheerful reflection on 'writing styles' (eg. specific abbreviations and formulations) used on online social platforms 'back then'. The participants displayed humorous 'embarrassment' about their style of writing. Further, alternative social networks used before Facebook (eg. Knuddels, SchülerVerzeichnis) as well as the popularity of YouTube channels were discussed. Although very insightful, they go beyond the scope of the present thesis.

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3.2 *Integrational Representation Model of the findings*

The model proposed here serves as an integrational representation of the findings. I, thereby, aim to illustrate how the adolescents relate to the presentation of the self in the virtual environment by integrating how the authentication process is situated between both environments.
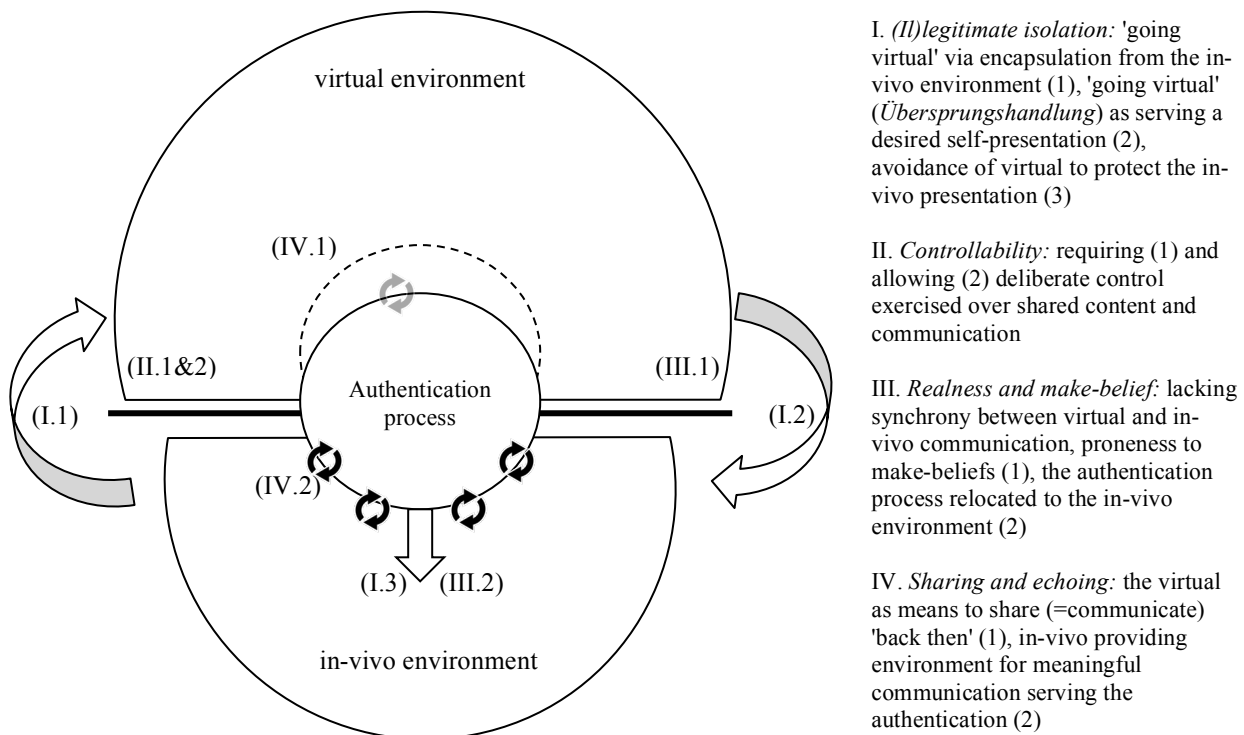

I. *(Il)legitimate isolation:* 'going virtual' via encapsulation from the in-vivo environment (1), 'going virtual' (*Übersprungshandlung*) as serving a desired self-presentation (2), avoidance of virtual to protect the in-vivo presentation (3)

II. *Controllability:* requiring (1) and allowing (2) deliberate control exercised over shared content and communication

III. *Realness and make-belief:* lacking synchrony between virtual and in-vivo communication, proneness to make-beliefs (1), the authentication process relocated to the in-vivo environment (2)

IV. *Sharing and echoing:* the virtual as means to share (=communicate) 'back then' (1), in-vivo providing environment for meaningful communication serving the authentication (2)

Figure 1. Integrational Representation Model of the adolescents' relation to the presentation of the self in the virtual and in-vivo environment and the *authentication process* as situated between the virtual and the in-vivo environment

The individual aims at the authentication of claims expressing the preferred self-constitution. Presenting preferred claims of the self to others, then, enables social negotiation. The presentation takes place in the in-vivo and the virtual environment. Central to the presentation of the self is not the *self* but the *authentication process to the constitution of a self,* which takes place within different environments.

The group experiences the two environments as distinctly separated from one another. 'Going virtual', to them, implicates encapsulation from or 'building a wall' against the others in the in-vivo environment (I.1). For the purpose of giving a desired self-presentation in the in-vivo environment, 'going virtual' can serve as an *Übersprungshandlung* in order to withdraw from giving an undesired presentation of the self in the in-vivo environment (I.2). Further, the virtual environment is rejected, as virtual sharing is considered threatening to one's privacy (I.3)

The virtual environment is perceived as providing a greater and potentially harmful environment as a greater audience has access to static and persistent presentations, which the group feels they have to exercise control over (II.1). Exercising control, as has been pointed out, is felt as hindering the authentication process as it counteracts an active engagement in spontaneous encounters. Meaningful encounter which holds the 'opportunity to engage with a given situation' is, then, rather ascribed to the in-vivo environment, which again distinctly separates the experience of both environments.

As the presentation of the self in the virtual environment is experienced as much more prone to *make-belief* (III.1), the authentication process, which requires a sense of 'realness' according to the adolescents, is believed to be rather related to the in-vivo presentation of the self (2). The in-vivo environment is, then, experienced as providing for a *stage* on which 'real' and, therefore, more valued interaction takes place.

Via *sharing and echoing* (IV.) the authentication process is shaped. Content is shared and responded in the virtual and in-vivo environment. Although the virtual environment as a potential stage for meaningful communication has been explored 'back then' (IV.1), the group finds that actual authenticating is relocated to the in-vivo environment (IV.2). As has been pointed out, the group experiences a lack of meaningfulness related to the sharing and echoing within the virtual environment. The in-vivo environment, however, holds the potential for meaningful sharing and echoing, the adolescents feel, they can rely on. Regarding the virtual environment, the process of authentication in meaningful interaction seems rather impeded.

4 Conclusions and Discussion

The present explorative study investigated *how adolescent e-users relate to the presentation of the self in the virtual environment as compared to the presentation of the self in the in-vivo environment* (main question). Further, it was investigated how the *process of authentication* inherent to the self-constitution relates to virtual self-presentation (sub-question). The social constructivist approach provided the theoretical point of departure to, thereby, revisit Goffman's theatrical metaphor on the *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. In the following, I will draw conclusions based on the findings of the present study and I will relate them to previous studies and literature. I will, then, discuss the potential value of approaching the presentation of the self in the virtual environment from a social constructivist approach

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and the implications it holds to earlier findings. Constraints and strength of the present study, as well as recommendations to further research, are embedded within the discussion.

4.1 *Conclusions and relation to Goffman*

Four themes have been identified covering for the experience of the adolescents in how they relate to the presentation of the self in the virtual environment as compared to the presentation of the self in the in-vivo environment. The themes cover (*il)legitimate isolation* which lacks social acknowledgement (I), fostered *controllability* (II), the proneness to *make-belief* and lack of '*realness'* (III), as well as the *sharing* and *echoing* impaired by a lack of meaning-making inherent to it (IV). It has been found that the virtual environment, Facebook, has lost its appeal to the adolescent e-users and is considered inferior to the in-vivo environment in serving meaningful self-presentation.

As providing for yet another *stage* to the presentation of the self, the virtual environment was thoroughly explored by the adolescents 'back then'. The *sharing* of small narratives, or posts, as well as the sharing of photos, video, events, places, which all serve a desired self-constitution, was fostered by the belief that communication provides for meaning, that communication gives meaning to one's experience, because, and this point seems crucial, if one shares, one will be seen, responded to and given feedback. The *formula* to go with, then, seemed simple: the more is shared, the more there is communication; the more there is communication, the more meaning is supposed to be rendered; this results in more sharing of the self in interaction with the other. The group, however, says to have revised it.

By posing the sub-question, *how the authentication process relates to the presentation of the self in the virtual environment*, I aimed at specifying how the adolescent relate to the presentation of the self in the virtual environment. By taking the social negotiability and the social acknowledgment of the presentation of the self in the virtual environment into account, it has been analyzed, how each theme related experience serves the *authentication process* according to the adolescents ranging from fostering the process to impeding it. It has been found that, according to the group of adolescent e-users under study, the process by which an authentication of preferred 'ways of being', or self-constitution is rather impeded. The virtual environment, Facebook, fails to provide an environment in which *meaningful* social discourse takes place, which can serve the authentication process. It can be concluded that the adolescent e-users under study experience certain disillusionment in finding a virtual stage on Facebook, which allows for engaging in authenticating 'who they want to be' in the world. This, then, accounts for their detachment from the virtual stage offered by Facebook.

To conclude on the findings relating to Goffman's notion on the *Presentation of the Self in Everday Life* (1956), I would like to draw further on the metaphorical illustration here. As has been pointed out, Facebook could be referred to as a multimedia 'high tech' stage for the performance of the individual aiming at the authentication of preferred self-constructions. The virtual stage, then, holds several characteristics distinct from the in-vivo 'stage', which can be deduced from the findings of the present study. Sharing requires an audience to communicate with. If the audience of a stage constitutes a small group and is located close to the actor, one is more likely to experience connecting with it, that is, to receive an echo that is experienced as 'real' and meaningful. On the virtual stage, however, the presentation via 'posting' is not directed at a specific person or group but at a rather *undefined* audience (as the postings are placed on a virtual wall without knowing who will actually read and relate to it). The person giving a presentation on a virtual stage seems impaired in overlooking the audience. It is, therefore, felt that he or she loses control in *relating* to it. Metaphorically speaking, the *stage light* blinds the actor as to that he or she is unable to see who is actually attending the presentation. In the negotiation as to what the adolescents can authenticate, they do not want to appear 'odd' in front of others but cannot deduce from reactions they receive online, as a) they doubt the credibility or b) reactions are missing in the first place. The sounding applause, may, then, be comparable to the affirmation received on Facebook in form of 'likes' and affirmative comments. As has been pointed out, the virtual presentation of the self is considered as inferior to in-vivo social encounter. Goffman highlights that the others, the person is interacting with, constitute both audience and partner in play. The findings suggest, however, that the adolescents seek to rather have direct interaction 'on stage', that is, having a partner in play directly responding to him or her as to be enabled to

- relate to others in *spontaneous* encounters as providing for potentially richer experiences (not 'calculated' beforehand)
- rely on facial expressions and actual physical encounter as to be enabled to deduce sincere reactions from it
- share without having to *expose* oneself to others in order to be responded to

Although the user can actively give form, configure the communicated content about her or him and exercise control on a seemingly less spontaneous but 'designed self-presentation', the content of the sharing and the lack of sufficient echoing make it unsatisfactory to the purpose of engaging in an authentication process within social discourse. Instead of directing a *monologue* of self-presentational performance to the audience on the virtual stage, the group

seeks to engage in direct *dialogue*. As the meaningfulness of the virtual self-presentation constitutes a social construction, the same meaningfulness can be deprived of the stage. The stage is, then, abandoned.

4.2 Discussion in relation to earlier research and literature

In the following I would like to discuss the findings and conclusion of the present study in relation to earlier research and literature.

The present study aimed at focusing on adolescents. It seems worthwhile to discuss and relate the conclusions drawn here to their life situation. Adolescence had been identified as a period in which life construction plays a crucial role (Murray, 1985). For this purpose it is "of great relevance to the young individual's identity formation that he be responded to and be given function" as Erikson states (1959, p.111). Based on the present study, I suggest adding that *meaningful* response is mandatory to the self-constitution. The adolescents, then, aim at generating meaning by exchanging self-narratives in mutual response. As they find themselves in a rite of passage, there is a strong desire to share 'outlines' of self-constructions within society and a life, they start to explore for themselves.

The group differentiated between and reflected on their activity on Facebook 'then' and 'now'. The group clearly stated that the virtual setting fails to be anymore meaningful and Facebook is, therefore, experienced as 'expendable'. It is not providing what is wanted in order to authenticate and self-constitute. I would like to bring into the discussion the notion that using or not using Facebook, however, is not a decision they make on purpose *prior* to joining it. As a new means of connecting and communicating with others, it is accepted and explored in the first place. They, thereby, "explore ideological and occupational option available in society" (McAdams, p.101). Nevertheless, they are indeed critical and *reflective* about whether it can serve as a meaningful tool. The group under study, here, finds itself having made the decision that it cannot provide them with meaningful communication on which basis they could constitute a self. Facebook, then, fails to create that one-on-one synchronization with the real world. One could conclude that technology, openly received by adolescents and meant to provide a channel for communication, is abandoned as soon as it disillusions in serving as platform for meaningful self-presentation, that is, meaningful sharing which contributes to the self-construction. Crucial seems, that a new technology can be imposed on them, but it will certainly be reflected on as to consider whether it can fulfill this purpose.

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The study reveals the self-reflective potential of adolescents in exploring environments offered to them to engage in social discourse. It draws on the adolescents' reflexion as means of exploring their experience and shows that there is a *rite of passage* inherent, that adolescents develop and evaluate the environment in which their communication is taking place. They *themselves* came to conclude that there is qualitative difference between real human connection and digital communication. One, therefore, could refer to the group as *mature e-users*. Should one be surprised, then, of their reflective potential?

I would like to draw on earlier research investigating the psychological implications of social networking and 'extensive preoccupation with the virtual environment' here. The research aim is, then, to explain and predict behavior as to gain rational control over ways of how social interaction is shaped. Thereby, it is sought to be able to anticipate problems, which may potentially arise from it. From an individualistic approach, Rosen and others propose that people are actually playing a role and "boast and brag" (Rosen, 2012) in front of others. Rosen gives the warning that the extensive use of social media technology fosters narcissism, and holds the danger of developing an *iDisorder*, that is, an extensive preoccupation with oneself, which, in turn, can elicit psychological distress and even major depression. Likewise, Turkle gives the warning that 'we are *alone together',* being isolated by means of excessive use of social media (2011). From the enormous research body related to Facebook studies, Rosen and Turkle seem compelling in approaching the public (see also Turkle's TED talk of 2012) as well as feed further campaign of research. They, then, impose the idea that technology holds dangers to our very human integrity. The implicated notion is, then, that e-users lack realization of potential dangers the virtual environment poses to them.

Based on the findings of the present study, however, this seems to not correspond with the adolescents experience when asking them as to how they relate to the virtual environment. Telling them that they are disguising their 'inner' or 'true' self and that this will probably cause psychological malady, begrudges them from developing towards their own evaluation of how and whether or not it could give meaningful contribution to their (social) life.

By approaching social constructivism, the present study seems to offer a complementary account to explore the *phenomenological experience* of the adolescents related to the presentation of the self in the virtual environment, as well as technology in general. The social constructivist approach emphasizes and accredits to the adolescents a *process* of meaning making. It allows for development by not withdrawing the responsibility linked to engaging into the *process of self-constitution*. As Aydin states, the constitution of

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the self implies a movement of *going towards* authenticating it (forthcoming). In line with Rogers, the adolescents find themselves in progress towards self-actualization (1959). Every social encounter, then, holds the opportunity to engage in that process in which one can relate to the others. This, then, also allows for the evaluation of the means by which one may be enabled to do so.

In his work on the '*Relational Being*' Gergen emphasizes that when one makes the claim of an inherent 'true' self, "then relationships are artificial" (2001, p.17). Drawing further on the implications of, what he refers to as, a *bounded being* inherent to the person he explicates:

> *"If the self is primary, then relationships are secondary in their importance to us. We must be forever cautious about connection. Relationships will inevitably place demands on the individual; expectations and obligations will develop; norms of right and wrong will be imposed. If we are not very careful, our freedom will be destroyed."* (p.17)

The individualistic approach, then, neglects the *becoming* of a person as a relational being. It is the same 'norms of right and wrong' imposed on the adolescents, which led to the conclusion that social networking, providing a stage for the presentation of the self, is potentially harmful.

The social constructivist approach, further, emphasizes that labels, names, and definitions of experiences always constitute a language-mediated construction. 'Having', that is, being in a *possession* of a 'disorder' or narcissist tendency, disconnects the person from their experience. Gergen suggests that we are relational *beings,* as the notion of an authentication *process* implies that authentication is not an entity to possess or to strive for as a possession. Goffman, likewise, highlights that the *self* is not a possession but constitutes a product of social discourse (Lemert & Branaman, 1997). 'Having' a self stands in the way to understanding that one is capable of generating it within social encounters. It is, then, also a practical approach to realize that one engages in a process and can, thereby, disengage from, make alterations to, and (re-)shape the self. Non-harmful social experimentation within different environments which give opportunity to communicate and share with others seems, then, indeed possible. The individual, and adolescent in particular, develops, that is, he or she *unfolds,* 'who one can be' in social interaction.

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4.3 Strength, constraints and recommendations

Several remarks can be made regarding strengths and constraints of the present study. Recommendations are included.

From a social constructivist approach, which has also been applied to the methodology of the present study, the focus group methodology acknowledges the collaborative structure of meaning. Meaning is, then, understood as being generated through social discourse. The method offers insight into the phenomenological quality of experience. Further, the conditions under study were embedded within a *narrative workshop*. The adolescent group was cheerful and very talkative in sharing their experience. As they felt comfortable in the social discourse with each other, they seemed to enjoy exchanging views and reflecting upon them. The focus group approach, then, enables not to test prior hypotheses but to explore and actually *witness* and *make negotiable* how they construct meaning within the peer group.

The conclusions of the present study derive from only one group. The findings may not adequately reflect the entire scope of experience related to the age group 16 to 24. It would be worthwhile, and therefore recommendable, to apply the given research method to other groups of the same age group as to make the shared experience comparable to each other and to investigate whether the findings apply to other groups of adolescents as well. This could also provide us with the opportunity to investigate whether and how other groups of the same age group find that Facebook contributes to the meaningful self-constitution. Differences and similarities in approaching the virtual environment could, then, be identified. It would, further, be interesting to focus on other virtual social platforms, which were said to replace Facebook, in order to investigate which psychological and social needs are felt to be fulfilled and how the presentation of the self as well as self-constitution is situated here.

Furthermore, certain *bias of experimentation*, that is, the fact that the adolescents participated in the study might have influenced the adolescents' reflection of the actual experience. Eliciting a reflective discussion subsequent to the *subjective* experience of shaping a self-narrative (*Letter from the Future*) directed at different environments aimed at reducing the bias. Prompting a reflection on self-presentational performances distinctly directed at the virtual and the in-vivo environment might have fostered the separation. Further research could assign the first and second condition to separate groups. The focus group discussion could, then, serve as an exchange of experiences providing new insight into how the virtual opposed to the in-vivo self-presentational act is attributed meaning to.

By following the social constructivist approach, I sought to investigate the social construction of how the adolescent subjectively relate to the self-presentation. Eliciting *self-*

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reflection in a focus group discussion, then, also holds an *emancipating function* to explorative qualitative research. The focus group might, however, not give a reflection of the adolescents' *actual behavior* of sharing and interacting within the virtual environment. The present study is, then, limited to the exploration of meaning making in verbal reflection, and cannot account for actual behavior.

4.4 Final remark

The conclusions of the present study do not suggest an abandonment of Facebook or other social networks. It acknowledges the *rite of passage*, that is, a learning process, underlying the exploration of opportunities to engage in a process of self-constitution. Rather than trying to educate parents and adolescents about possible dangers the virtual environment poses, manifested in new forms of psychological distress, parents might benefit from granting their children a process of *becoming* via social experimentation and discourse.

Finally, the social constructivist approach can provide a highly valuable and thorough revision of Goffman's theatrical metaphor, which, then (again), holds meaningful contribution to understanding the human being in (social) life. At the same time of being able to integrate a 'model' or 'metaphor' for understanding the complexity of social life, social constructivism, however, does not forfeit to account for the *unique* and *subjective* meaning making process of the adolescents. Based on the findings of this study, I recommend that further research should focus on the *relational being* as well as on the *process* of shaping the self-constitution in relationship. It is, then, possible to describe and explore this very process, which can provide us with the potential to understand what is happening in the *being* - not the *having*.

5 Acknowledgements

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7 Appendix

A. *Instructions for writing the Letter from the Future*

Schreibe einen Brief aus der Zukunft

Fühle dich frei, Deiner Fantasie freien Lauf zu lassen: Erinnere Dich, dass es um eine Zukunft geht, welche noch nicht eingetroffen ist und dass hier die Möglichkeit besteht, zu überlegen, was passieren könnte. Die folgenden Vorschläge können Dir eine Idee vermitteln, wie Du den Brief aus der Zukunft schreiben kannst. Fühle Dich frei, diese Anleitung als eine Grundlage zu nehmen, Deinen Brief auf Deine ganz eigene Weise zu schreiben. Ändere Namen gegebenenfalls um.

Stelle Dir vor, Du reist in einer Zeitmaschine in eine von Dir *gewünschte Situation*, in welcher zum Beispiel ein Wunsch wahr geworden ist, positive Veränderungen geschehen sind, sich ein Traum von Dir realisiert hat, oder Du eine schwierige Situation bewältigt hast. Versuche Dir diese Situation so genau wie möglich vorzustellen (zum Beispiel: wie sieht der Ort aus, wie fühlt er sich an? Wer ist da? Was geschieht?).

Erzähle von diesem spezifischen Tag in der Zukunft, von diesem spezifischen Moment in der Zukunft oder von diesem spezifischen Ereignis in der Zukunft und beschreibe, was auch immer diesen Tag, diesen Moment oder dieses Ereignis möglich gemacht hat und wie Du zurückschaust auf Deinen Weg in diese Zukunft.

Du schreibst den Brief aus der Zukunft an Dein jetziges Ich und endest mit einer Botschaft an Dein jetziges Ich.

Taken and translated from Sools and Mooren (2012)

B. Invitation narrative workshop 'Erzählen wer ich sein werde'

HERZLICH WILLKOMMEN ZUM WORKSHOP

ERZÄHLEN, WER ICH SEIN WERDE

Ich freue mich über Dein Interesse an dem Workshop 'ERZÄHLEN, WER ICH SEIN WERDE'. Dieser findet im Zuge einer Untersuchung zur Identitätskonstruktion im Fachbereich der Narrativen Psychologie statt.

Im Rahmen der Positiven Psychologie werden an der Universität Twente seit geraumer Zeit Studien zur *Narrativen Zukunftsverbildlichung* durchgeführt. Der Zweig der Positiven Psychologie konzentriert sich auf die Förderung mentaler Gesundheit (einschließlich der Frage: *Was bedeutet 'mentale Gesundheit'?*), sowie unter anderem auf die Entfaltung eigener Potentiale (einschließlich der Frage: *Wer sind wir? Was wollen wir? Wo gehen wir hin?*).

> **Vorstellen kannst Du Dir den Fokus der Narrativen Psychologie unter dem Deckmantel „Erzählen, wer ich war, wer ich bin, wer ich sein werde".**

Gerne möchte ich Dich dazu einladen, an dem Workshop zur persönlichen Zukunftsverbildlichung teilzunehmen. Die hier gewonnenen Erkenntnisse möchte ich in die Abschlussarbeit meines Bachelorstudiums integrieren. Diese Untersuchung bietet mir Vertiefung zur Analyse von Identitätskonstruktionen innerhalb heutiger Gesellschaftsformen und trägt zur wissenschaftlichen Auseinandersetzung innovativer (therapeutischer) Ansätze sowie zum Verständnis menschlichen Denkens uns Handelns bei.

Ich hoffe, dass Du für Dich persönlich etwas aus den Inhalten mitnehmen kannst. Außerdem erhältst Du Einblicke in eine dir vielleicht noch völlig unbekannte Richtung der Psychologie, welche, so wie ich glaube, zukünftig an Bedeutung gewinnen wird, da wir hier einem Fokus anstreben, welcher die pure Wissenschaft der Psychologie transzendiert. Gerne nehme ich bei Interesse an der Untersuchung und/oder dem Studium mit Euch das Gespräch auf. Der Workshop endet zudem mit einem gemeinsamen Abendessen, welches vollständig durch mich gestellt wird.

VORAUSSETZUNGEN ZUR TEILNAHME
Zur Teilnahme am Workshop ist es wichtig, dass Du seit mindestens sechs Monaten im Besitz eines Facebook-Accounts bist, da wir dieses Portal im Zuge der Kommunikation nutzen werden. Es sind des weiteren keine Vorbereitung Deinerseits notwendig.

DATEN UND PROGRAMM
Der Workshop findet am Samstag, den 19. April 2015 statt und wird sich voraussichtlich über vier Stunden erstrecken (einschließlich einer 90 Minuten Pause). Wir werden uns in einer Gruppe von 6-8 Personen, welche Deinem ungefähren Alter entsprechen, zusammenfinden.

Ort	Programm	
Gebäude Vrijhof	Beginn 1. Sitzung	14:00 – 15:00 Uhr
De Veltmaat 5	Pause	15:00 – 16:30 Uhr
Universität Twente	Beginn 2. Sitzung	16:30 – 18:00 Uhr
7522 NM Enschede	Gemeinsames Abendessen	ab 18:00 Uhr Uhr

Sollten sich im Voraus Fragen über und/oder Anmerkungen zur Teilnahme am Workshop oder der Studie ergeben, stehe ich gerne zur Verfügung. Gerne kannst Du Kontakt aufnehmen via g.gossler@student.utwente.nl oder unter der mobilen Nummer 0049 1577 6437602.

Über Deine Teilnahme am Workshop würde ich mich sehr freuen. Zur Bestätigung bitte ich Dich, die beigefügte Teilnahmebestätigung auszufüllen und mir bis einschließlich Samstag, 19. April zukommen zu lassen.

Vielen Dank für Dein Interesse.
Mit freundlichen Grüßen,
Grace Gossler

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.