



Becoming oneself online: narrative self-constitution and the internet

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Abstract

This paper explores how self-identity can be impacted upon by the use of digital and social media. In particular, drawing on a narrative account of selfhood, it argues that some forms of activity and interaction on the internet can support the capacity to be oneself, and foster transformative processes that are self-enhancing.

I start by introducing different positions in the philosophical exploration of identity online, critically outlining the arguments of those who hold a “pessimistic” and an “optimistic” stance respectively. I then expand on the narrative identity framework that has been used to support the optimists’ view, arguing that digital and social media use can foster forms of self-understanding that enable us to preserve or develop our identity. More precisely, exploring these dynamics also in relation to the lived experience of mental ill-health, I maintain that internet-enabled technology can support narrative self-constitution in three main ways: (1) by facilitating the processes through which we remember self-defining life-stories; (2) by enabling us to give salience to the stories that we decide should matter the most; and (3) by providing us with opportunities to obtain social uptake for our narratives. I then conclude by dispelling some possible objections to the use of a narrative approach to account for selfhood online.

Keywords Narrative self · Self-identity · Embodiment · Internet technology · Mental health

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1 Introduction

Due to its widespread use, internet-enabled technology has an increasing impact on multiple aspects of our lives, including their cognitive, emotional, and practical dimensions. As such, various pressing questions concerning subjectivity, sociality, and mental wellbeing in the digital age have emerged, and philosophical research on the topic has been expanding.

In this paper, I aim to tackle a contentious point within philosophical debates on online experience, namely how self-identity¹ is impacted upon by the use of digital and social media. More specifically, I seek to explore in what ways the capacity to be ourselves can be hindered or supported by activity and interaction on the internet.

To my knowledge, this question has not been systematically addressed by philosophical research on the mind and technology. Nevertheless, some of the contributions in this area have developed insights that are relevant to the conceptualisation of how selfhood is affected by online experience. In this regard, we can indeed broadly identify two main sets of positions, which I will refer to as the “pessimistic” and “optimistic” stance respectively.²

The positions that here I associate with pessimism tend to draw attention to the discontinuities or differences between online and offline worlds, interpreting virtual environments as lacking or impoverished in comparison to material ones. With regard specifically to selfhood, the upshot of these views is that on the internet we are likely to be diminished, partial, or inaccurate versions of who we really are.

On the other hand, the positions that embody an optimistic stance emphasise the commonalities between online and offline worlds, or when they point to the existence of differences, they do not interpret them as making virtual environments necessarily defective or sub-optimal. In fact, some optimists draw attention to how the distinct features of online spaces make them more flexible and potentially more welcoming for those who have certain social identities. This paves the way to a much more positive view of the possibilities of self-expression and self-development available to us on the internet.

This paper expands on the optimists’ position by developing a distinct argument in support of the idea that not only one’s self can be expressed – without impoverishment or distortion – through computer-mediated interaction, but also that such interaction can be a catalyst for self-transformative processes that are self-enhancing.

I start by reconstructing some of the arguments put forward within the “pessimistic” and the “optimistic” side respectively. First, I draw attention to how pessimism concerning self-identity online can be rooted in concerns about the lack or diminish-

¹ I use the term “self-identity” to refer to the range of character traits, mental states, cares, concerns, and actions that make someone the particular individual that they are. This falls within the remit of what Marya Schechtman has defined as the “characterization question” (1996, 73 ff.) in debates on personal identity.

² In their exploration of philosophical questions concerning online sociality, Lucy Osler and Dan Zahavi (Osler, 2022; Osler & Zahavi, 2023) differentiate between the views of the “techno-optimists” and the “techno-pessimists”. While my focus here is on matters concerning identity – and not social experience – I think it is still helpful to map the relevant debates by distinguishing between an optimists’ and a pessimists’ camp.

ment of embodiment on the internet, outlining how these concerns can be counteracted, and suggesting that pessimism does not take into sufficient consideration the diversity of people's experiences online (§ 2). I then outline some of the optimistic views about self-expression and self-development online (§ 3), drawing on them to conceptualise the connection between the use of digital technology and authenticity.

More specifically, after having reconstructed Marya Schechtman's narrative account of the relationship between avatars and their users in virtual worlds (2012), I draw on the narrative identity framework to argue that digital and social media use can foster forms of self-understanding that enable us to preserve or foster our identity (§ 4). More precisely, I argue that internet-enabled technology can support narrative identity in three main ways: (1) by facilitating the processes through which we remember self-defining life-stories; (2) by enabling us to give salience to the stories that we decide should matter the most; and (3) by providing us with opportunities to obtain social uptake for our narratives.

Finally, I conclude by dispelling a range of possible objections to the use of a narrative approach to account for selfhood online (§ 5).

2 The pessimists: the fear of "disembodiment"

There are various reasons why people may be pessimists about the impact that communicating and interacting on the internet may have on self-identity. In this regard, a very influential line of argument revolves around the different ways in which the body is involved in online and offline activities (cf. Dreyfus, 2009; Fuchs, 2021; Stanghellini, 2020).

Virtual environments appear to offer more flexibility than non-virtual ones when it comes to the ways in which bodily features and experiences are shown and drawn upon. Not only the body can be invisible in cyberspace, but we also have a great degree of control over how it appears when it is visible, which can foster concerns about the truthfulness of how we present and represent ourselves on the internet. Hiding, embellishing, or exaggerating aspects of our bodies, as well as our stories and personalities, seems easier to do when we are not encountering others 'in the flesh', and this can foster the perception of online worlds as places where "deception and misrepresentation" can occur much more easily (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004: 42).

Moreover, suspicion towards self-expression and self-development on the internet can be nurtured by observing that, due to the lack of embodiment, this is a space where it is more difficult to perform activities that are key to fashioning one's identity. For example, Hubert Dreyfus has stressed how on the internet it is easier to not live up to our commitments, and to make choices that do not really carry risks, because what happens online can be more easily reversed and kept separate from other areas of our life (Dreyfus, 2009: Ch. 5).

Relatedly, it has been suggested that computer-mediated communication cannot reproduce some key aspects of face-to-face sociality and affectivity, which strengthens the suspicion that online encounters cannot be as authentic as offline ones.

For example, Thomas Fuchs has suggested that the empathic understanding that sustains interpersonal relations is grounded in forms of inter-corporeal resonance that

are stifled when interacting online, where imaginative processes – and thus, potentially, projection and illusion – come to play a bigger role (2021: Ch. 3). From this perspective, our ability to comprehend and connect with others, originates in the capacity to grasp their mental states through their bodily expressions, and to attune to the other person’s emotions through appropriate bodily responses. However, often, such bodily signals are not easy to read, track, or express when we interact through digital devices, and the extent to which we can partake in affective experiences and atmospheres online is also questioned (Dreyfus, 2009). This leads to the claim that social connectedness must be negatively affected online. As remarked by Fuchs, “[t]oday, our relationships come increasingly to be mediated, even produced, by images. But no one encounters us through a smartphone. The virtual presence of the other cannot replace intercorporeality” (2021: 101).

Another reason in virtue of which one may claim that being oneself is difficult or even impossible on the internet has to do with the role that self-consciousness plays in online experience and interaction. For instance, when attending a meeting on Zoom or similar platforms, we may become increasingly aware of features of our appearance as we can see and monitor our image on screen.³ Arguably, the use of social networks can heighten self-consciousness too, as here we have the possibility to easily check, over and over again, how others see us (for example, through our pictures, videos, posts, etc.). In addition, social media give us plenty of opportunities to observe and scrutinise other people. As such, when online, not only we can be more aware of ourselves than we would otherwise be, but we also tend to be more aware of how some of our characteristics or experiences fare in comparison to those of other people, and how we may be perceived by them.

These features of cyberspaces appear problematic to those who think that, in order to be authentic, self-experience and self-expression need to be spontaneous and unreflective, and that taking an observational stance towards ourselves is likely to go hand in hand with a loss of contact with bodily and affective experiences that are central to a sense of self. Stanghellini (2020), for instance, has argued that certain digital practices – epitomised by the widespread use of selfies – are an expression of the attempt to define one’s identity by looking at oneself through the perspective of others, an attempt which both originates in and exacerbates a difficulty to remain immersed in one’s feelings and to draw on them to weave one’s identity.

Pessimistic accounts of self- and other-experience online have been influential in the field of philosophical research on technology, and their scope has been often wide-ranging. For example, in his book *On the Internet*, Dreyfus details numerous shortcomings of communication and interaction in cyberspace, suggesting that the “dis-embodiment” undergone on the internet inevitably hinders some of our cognitive, affective and agential capacities. As outlined in the introduction to the book, Dreyfus indeed seeks to demonstrate that:

“if our body goes, and we live, for example, through avatars (virtual bodies) as in *Second Life*, we will largely lose our sense of relevance, our ability to acquire

³ This seems to be associated with experiences such as “Zoom fatigue” (Bailenson, 2021), which were increasingly reported as uses of online technology skyrocketed during the pandemic of Covid-19.

skills, our sense of resistant reality, our ability to make maximally meaningful commitments, and the embodied moods that give life serious meaning.” (2009: 7)

Such a pessimistic view is consonant with a range of difficulties with which internet users are familiar, and points to factors that need to be taken into account when assessing the risks of embedding our lives more and more in cyberspace. Nevertheless, there also appear to be significant reasons to challenge the pessimistic account.

In the first place, the suggestion that deception is easier online and that on the internet commitments are inherently more fleeting and less risky rests on the assumption that ‘cyber’ and ‘real’ spaces are neatly separated, and that it is easy to keep the two apart. However, due to the widespread use of digital and social media and their portability (cf. Krueger & Osler, 2019), online and offline worlds are increasingly intermingled, creating continuity, and accountability, across these dimensions.

More generally, the idea that the mediation of internet-enabled technology produces experiences that are less embodied or “dis-embodied” can be questioned too. For example, Osler (2024) and Osler and Krueger (2022) have drawn attention to how some key dimensions of bodily and affective phenomenology are present in – and can be sustained by – online activity, suggesting that online worlds can be imbued with emotional expressivity and scaffold interpersonal understanding and social connection. Not only empathic understanding rooted in the perception of certain bodily signals (e.g. an emotional tone) can take place online (Osler, 2024), but on the internet we can also experience “feelings of togetherness” and interpersonal emotional regulation (Osler, 2020; Krueger & Osler, 2019). Moreover, research in philosophy of emotion has highlighted how rich and intense affective states experienced on the internet can be.⁴

In addition, supporters of the pessimistic approach seem to inflate the benefits of non-reflective experience, while overly-emphasising the negative effects of increased self- and other-consciousness. While becoming reflectively aware of our experiences can have a disruptive impact, this is not necessarily the case. On the contrary, reflectivity can sometimes be necessary in order to enable the smooth progression of experiences of a certain kind. For example, while we may not need to monitor each of our facial expressions during a conversation, remaining aware of our tone of voice and bodily demeanour may be important when conveying delicate news to someone.

Similarly, becoming reflectively aware of how we are perceived or judged by other people may be counter-productive in some circumstances, but extremely useful in others (e.g. when trying to be convincing during a delicate negotiation). Furthermore, this form of awareness is not necessarily associated with a detachment or an estrangement from our own embodied and affective experience. Indeed, in some cases, the perception of our own emotions and desires, for example, can be strengthened by the recognition that others ascribe those emotions and desires to us.

As such, it seems unwarranted to suggest that digital technology fosters inauthenticity because it promotes forms of self-consciousness that increase a loss of contact with oneself. On the contrary, like other forms of reflective self-awareness, those that

⁴ See Ben-Ze’ev (2004) for a wealth of examples connected to romantic and sexual relationships online.

can be facilitated by online activity may have the potential to contribute to establish or enhance new forms of non-reflective experience, sustaining also certain forms of self-development and self-understanding.

More broadly, an important reason to disagree with the pessimists is the fact that the account does not acknowledge the diversity of experiences that people may have on the internet. For example, as I discussed in previous work (Bortolan, 2023), some people with experiences of mental ill-health report that interacting online has positive effects on their mental wellbeing. Importantly, these effects are sometimes cashed out as involving the capacity to be oneself, or to regain or fully express such self.

A number of these testimonies have emerged during the pandemic of Covid-19, when many people were forced to move a significant amount of their lives online. For example, some people experiencing social anxiety found that their anxiety was mitigated when communicating on Zoom or via other online platforms, and that this facilitated their self-expression (Bortolan, 2023). For example, in an article in *The Guardian* discussing the effects of working remotely, Matthew Cantor offers the following observations:

“these days, most of my work-related interaction is through office chat apps. [...] The slowed interaction gives me time to think, allows me to write considered arguments, and makes me more articulate – essentially, it allows me to be more of the person I aspire to be.” (Cantor, 2021: para. 6)

The idea that online activity and interaction hinders the capacity to be oneself can thus be challenged on the grounds that it is in tension with at least some of the first-personal experiences reported by internet users. Furthermore, the reasons in virtue of which some people find that the use of digital technology facilitates – rather than inhibit – self-expression also conflict with the account of embodiment that underscores the pessimistic stance. Indeed, as I previously argued (Bortolan, 2023), it is also in virtue of the reduced centrality of the body in digital interactions, and the greater control and flexibility that we can exercise in managing bodily appearances online, that, for some, the internet is a place where identity can be more easily revealed and fashioned.

3 The optimists: the narrative view

A version of the optimists’ argument is grounded in the adoption of a particular account of selfhood, which is present within some strands of phenomenology and hermeneutics, but has also been given an independent characterisation within different areas of philosophy and other disciplines. This is the account provided by theories of narrative identity or the narrative self (e.g. Bruner, 2003, 2004; Ricoeur, 1992; Schechtman, 1996). According to these approaches, “who” we are as persons, our individual character or identity, is constituted through the engagement with certain

narratives. More specifically, it is by constructing, sharing, and upholding particular stories about experiences and events in our lives that we become ourselves.⁵

There are different positions in the literature with regard to what are the core aspects of self-defining narratives, and which are the processes through which these narratives are formed (Schechtman, 2007). However, various approaches converge in suggesting that a way of thinking or talking about ourselves has a narrative structure when the experiences and events that it reports are meaningfully connected (Goldie, 2012: 2 ff.; Schechtman, 2007: 159 ff.).

It is important to note that affective states such as emotions and moods, are central to these dynamics, as the stories we tell about ourselves are rooted in the experience of particular affects, and these, in turn, are impacted upon by our self-narratives (Bortolan, 2017, 2021).⁶

One aspect of these dynamics has to do with the way in which our emotions impact on the content of the stories we tell about ourselves. For example, as highlighted by Valerie Hardcastle, the events to which we respond emotionally are “tagged” as important, and are the ones that are more likely to be included in our narratives (2003: 354). This is compounded by the existence of a close relationship between affectivity, evaluation, and motivation. As various philosophers have argued, emotions are experiences of value, significance, or importance (Slaby, 2008) and are both constitutive and reflective of our cares and concerns (cf. Slaby, 2008; Helm, 2009). In addition, emotions have the power to move us to think and act in certain ways (ibid.).

On the other hand, autobiographical story-telling itself can have emotional effects. For example, the way in which we characterise ourselves through narrative self-understanding can have an influence on our capacity to experience certain types of emotion (cf. Bortolan, 2021).

Acknowledging the relation between affectivity and narrativity is key to the success of narrative approaches, as it enables them to avoid a potential objection, namely that the ability to tell an intelligible story about how one has changed over time is not enough to guarantee that personal identity has been preserved (cf. Schechtman, 2001: 100). The acknowledgement that affective experience and narrative self-understanding are intertwined informs some versions of the narrative account, such as the one proposed by Schechtman (2001), who argues that, in order for a narrative of change to be identity-preserving, one should retain “empathic access” to the events that it portrays.

The narrative approach has been appealed to to explore various features of our relationship with digital devices. For example, Osler (2023) has drawn attention to

⁵ Marya Schechtman (1996, 2007) has called her version of this approach the “narrative self-constitution view”, but the notion of narrative self-constitution has also been used to refer to narrative accounts more broadly (e.g. Gallagher, 2000). It is in the latter sense that “narrative self-constitution”, and related formulations, are used in this article.

⁶ Research on affects and narratives has also played a role in the understanding of the lived experience of mental illness, as it has been suggested that various forms of mental ill-health (e.g. depression and borderline personality disorder), may involve disruptions of narrative self-understanding that are intertwined with alterations of emotions and moods (cf. Bortolan, 2017, 2020). In the remaining sections of this paper, the connection between affectivity, narrativity, and mental health will be further highlighted through the exploration of particular uses of digital technology.

how digital technologies can not only store but also mould aspects of our stories, and Schechtman has applied the narrative approach to the exploration of the relationship between users and their avatars in *Second Life* (2012), a multiplayer online virtual world, developing what I consider to be a version of the optimistic stance.

Schechtman's analysis is motivated by the willingness to better understand the relation between the physical person who is active in virtual worlds and the "fictional" characters created by the person in these worlds. In particular, Schechtman shows that there is a non-"trivial sense" in which an avatar in *Second Life* "can truly be the same person as her user" (2012: 341). According to Schechtman, this happens when the avatar's online narrative and the user's offline narrative can be seen as "sub-narratives" of one person's story, and this seems to depend on the online and offline narratives being in a particular relation to each other.

Schechtman draws attention to how the actions of avatars in *Second Life* and of their users in real life can influence each other. For example, avatars can perform activities, such as selling things, that enable their users to earn money, or they can relate to other avatars in ways that can impact on the personal and social life of their users offline (2012: 338–339). On the other hand, what happens outside of the virtual world also influences the actions of the avatar in *Second Life*: for example, if a user needs to leave their device for a certain period of time, the actions of their avatar during that period will be interrupted (2012: 340). Building on this, Schechtman shows that, while the narratives of avatars in *Second Life* and the narratives of users in real life are different, sometimes they can be components, or "sub-narratives", of a single-person's broader story.

There are various reasons why Schechtman's account is helpful. The opportunities to engage with virtual worlds are growing and the idea that, before too long, we could be spending most of our lives in virtual reality may no longer seem far-fetched, as many are already partaking in various virtual "microverses" (Evans et al., 2022). In this context, investigating the nature of avatars and our relationship with them from an ontological perspective is a pressing and valuable endeavour.

However, many people do not yet make use of forms of digital technology that involve immersion in virtual environments through the creation of an avatar. While virtual worlds like *Second Life* remain popular (cf. Evans et al., 2022), the use of other forms of internet-enabled technology is particularly widespread. Among the most popular platforms in this context are social media like Facebook and Twitter (now X) (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024), where we are not required to create avatars or fictional characters, but there is rather an expectation that we will interact with others as ourselves, that is by maintaining our 'real life'⁷ identity.⁸

⁷ Here, I use the expression 'real life' to indicate the experiences, events and interactions that take place offline or face-to-face. I employ this terminology as it is also a common way to refer to our lives off the internet, but, in doing so I do not mean to imply that online environments, and what we experience in them, is less real. I also think that, given the almost ubiquitous use of digital technology, it is not really possible to distinguish between life online and offline, as the two are deeply intertwined. The latter point is supported by the insights I develop in this paper too.

⁸ This could be considered to be an artificial distinction in so far as the avatar one creates in a virtual world like *Second Life* may not be aimed to be a fictional character, but rather a faithful rendition of one's offline self. On the other hand, one's profile on social media may have features that are completely differ-

This does not mean that questions concerning self-identity are less central when we talk about social networks, but only that these questions acquire a different character in this context. While the issue Schechtman focuses on is the metaphysical relation between two seemingly distinct entities (i.e. the user and the avatar), what comes to the fore when we think about social media is how the identity of one entity (i.e. the user) is expressed – and potentially affected by its own expression – online. So, what is most prominent when we think about the self in this context is the question of *authenticity*: can our online selves be an accurate expression of our offline selves? And what relationship exists between the two?⁹

Ideas that are helpful to answer these questions have come to the fore within the tradition of “cyberfeminism” (cf. Consalvo, 2003), in which various authors have argued that certain technologies have a significant potential for positive disruption and personal transformation. In contrast with the pessimists’ reading of the role of dis-embodiment online, some feminist authors have suggested that, through the mediation of technology, oppressive and marginalising practices and understandings of embodiment can be challenged favouring emancipatory processes (cf. Haraway, 1991; Hayles, 1999; Russell, 2020). The insights developed within this literature help us to see why online worlds too are places where self-identity can be both expressed and fashioned authentically.

Expanding upon this, in the rest of this paper I will explore how the narrative self-understanding of digital and social media users can be impacted upon by the use of these media, providing support for the optimistic stance through the exploration of a set of phenomena that are not yet fully taken into account within philosophical debates on online identity. In particular, by exploring also the lived experience of mental ill-health, in the next section I will argue that internet-enabled technology can support narrative self-constitution in three specific ways.

4 Becoming oneself online

Internet-enabled technology provides us with an array of tools to represent and share our life narratives. For example, on social networks like Facebook we can report events that we have experienced through written descriptions, photos, videos, or a combination of these. However, as noted by Osler (2023), digital technologies can function as “narrative devices” also because they can play a role in the processes through which our stories are created. In line with this idea, in the following I will argue that digital platforms can support specific aspects of the engagement with one’s self-narratives, sustaining the processes through which a self is constituted through autobiographical story-telling.

ent from one’s own. However, there is an expectation – conveyed also by the design of these platforms and users’ activities in them – that our profiles on social media like Facebook and X will be reflective of our identities in real life.

⁹ For a discussion of different meanings of personal identity and how they may be relevant in online environments, see Rodogno (2012). Here the author also suggests that those who support a theory of narrative identity should consider the way in which personal identity might be affected by online activities (2012: 325–326).

4.1 Digital technology and narrative memory

In the first place, digital platforms can foster the recall of our stories, or aspects of them. As noted by Osler, “[d]igital technology also helps us to remember” and digital devices act as storage spaces for at least some of our autobiographical narratives (2023). Not only our profiles on social media can feature a more or less extensive amount of biographical information – such as age, education, or profession – but effectively these media act as repositories or “archives” that preserve information about a wide range of personal experiences and events (Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013: 44). Effectively, when we post about what happens to us, we create a digital trace that remains available to refer to until we decide otherwise. In addition, some of these traces can also be automatically brought back to our attention by the media themselves, as it is the case when a recent post of ours is displayed again among the information on our homepage.

Digital and social media can thus provide us with ‘hooks’, so to speak, to anchor our memories, a series of cues or patterns of activity that can facilitate the retrieval of certain stories, both individually and interpersonally. For example, Facebook can remind me of my birthday and important life events, such as my PhD graduation, or that a certain number of years have passed since I started my current job.

Memories are the building blocks of our life stories and the role and the importance of the technologies that can support them becomes particularly visible when we consider how autobiographical narrativity can be affected by different types of illness.

For example, it has been shown that the ability to uphold a rich and diverse narrative of one’s life can be hindered in various forms of mental ill-health. This does not mean that one can no longer remember important facts or events in one’s stories, but rather that one’s stories may become very selective, for example, privileging aspects that are consonant with the dominant moods experienced as part of the illness, and excluding others (Bortolan, 2017).

For example, when experiencing depression, the stories that we tell about ourselves may become focused on what we perceive to be flaws or mistakes we have made, portraying ourselves in negative terms as lacking, defective, or even worthless. For instance, Seligman (2006; Bortolan, 2017: 82) has suggested that depression is associated with a pessimistic “explanatory style”, which is characterised as a particular way of conceiving of the causes and implications of negative (and positive) events. In particular, Seligman suggests that pessimism is associated with the tendency to provide *personal*, *pervasive* and *permanent* explanations of bad events (as well as the opposite type of explanations for good events).

The personalisation aspect refers to the tendency to attribute responsibility to oneself – rather than to others or external factors – when something bad happens. For instance, one may explain a loss at a competitive game by claiming that they are not good at games, rather than considering the role of luck in determining the result (cf. Seligman, 2006: 50).

Pervasiveness can be characterised as the tendency to provide generalised (“universal”) accounts of the causes of negative events, as opposed to circumscribed (“specific”) accounts. For instance, someone who explains a romantic rejection in

pervasive terms may think that they have been rejected because they are unlikable, and not because a particular person does not like them (cf. Seligman, 2006: 47).

Finally, permanence has to do with the tendency to consider as causes of bad events factors that are unchangeable or unlikely to change, as opposed to factors that are temporary. For example, one may explain an unpleasant interaction with a colleague as due to a long-term disposition of the colleague, rather than reading it in light of circumstantial factors (cf. Seligman, 2006: 44).

These features of the explanatory style associated with depression are underscored by the centrality of experiences of worthlessness in this condition (APA, 2022: 183; Beck & Alford, 2009: 229–230). A devaluation of, and lack of trust in one's abilities and potential is indeed a common feature in depression, and this is reflected in a shift of one's self-understanding towards stories that depict oneself in certain manners. This leads to the impression that story-telling may become repetitive when we are depressed (Angus & Greenberg, 2011: 62; Bortolan, 2017: 82), as narrative patterns revolving around negative self-assessments recur in the stories through which depressed persons depict events in their lives (Bortolan, 2017).

My suggestion here is that, when curated in certain ways, digital profiles can help to counteract the unrealistic or partial character of the stories we build, by reminding us of a wide range of aspects of ourselves that would otherwise be concealed or downplayed within our narratives.

An example of how this may happen is provided by the Facebook "memories" functionality, which can remind us of previous achievements or noteworthy episodes in our lives that we may become easily oblivious too. In these cases, the platform automatically notifies us of what we posted on the same day in previous years, giving us the option to share again the relevant information.

While through this functionality memories are brought to our attention independently of our intention and willingness to remember, there are many other ways in which digital and social media can facilitate recollection through active engagement with the platform. For example, photos and videos shared on social media remain easily accessible to us, and this can significantly enhance the vividness with which we recall the relevant events. Seeing a visual representation of an event I am thinking about can indeed confer on the memory a specific emotional intensity.

One could wonder whether the increased availability of certain memories is enough to counteract the impoverishment of one's self-narratives that may be driven by certain affects, for example in depression. The memories that are evoked could indeed be re-interpreted in ways that are aligned with one's dominant moods, reinforcing a partial or inaccurate story.

While this is possible, I think that the concern can be mitigated by considering how on digital and social media memories can be framed in ways that facilitate certain interpretations. For example, when we are reminded of past events or life milestones on Facebook, these reminders can be accompanied by positive emotion markers (e.g. celebratory or cheerful icons). Furthermore, as the memories can be shared with others on this network, the positive interpretation of the relevant events can be supported by consonant social responses. In addition, even if the memories are not shared, through the media's archives we can easily view the responses that

we received when we first made available on the platform information about those achievements.

However, one may further challenge the role of digital and social media in supporting memory by claiming that internet-enabled technology may facilitate the preservation only of certain autobiographical narratives, and that this can lead to the distortion and manipulation of one's self-conception. This is what is argued by Osler (2023), who draws attention to the fact that digital devices often provide information about quantifiable aspects of the self (e.g. in relation to health or productivity parameters) but may not be able to convey other types of self-narratives. More broadly, Osler highlights how the use of digital technology may lead to a form of "narrative railroading" which she characterises as the circumstances in which "our digital devices encourage us to develop, focus on, and sustain certain self-narratives over others" (2023: para. 9).

Osler is right in pointing out that the media we use are not neutral with regard to the type of memories, and therefore, self-narratives that they foster. The platforms' infrastructure is set up to facilitate certain patterns of relation to oneself and others, and this means that some forms of experience and story-telling may be favoured while others are hindered.

Nevertheless, it is worth emphasising that we still have a significant degree of freedom as the curators of our own digital profiles, and while social media platforms, for instance, are geared towards reminding us of certain things at certain times, we still have a significant degree of control over the contents that they operate with. For instance, it is up to us whether we share information concerning our hobbies, our job, or our interpersonal relations, and this contributes to determine what kind of digital archives we will have access to in the reconstruction of our stories.

4.2 Digital technology and narrative salience

Internet-enabled technology not only can support our and others' ability to remember our life stories. Such technology can also help us to bring to the fore the aspects of our narratives that we want to matter the most. A simple but clear example of how this may happen is the possibility we have, on digital platforms like X, to "pin" certain posts so that they remain visible at the top of our profile pages over time. This enables us to give prominence to certain aspects of our stories, making them more salient for ourselves and others.

More broadly, through internet-enabled technology we can enhance the visibility and tangible character of some of our stories by documenting them through different media. As emphasised before, when we tell a story, we can do so not only with words, but also, for instance, through the use of photos, videos, symbolic or humorous images, emojis, or a combination of these, which can make the stories in question more vivid and memorable.

In addition, we have a significant amount of choice over which of our stories are shared online. On the internet, we can be selective with regard to what we tell about ourselves and who we tell it to. Importantly, we can decide to delete or amend certain stories if we want to, including when we think that these stories are no longer important or reflective of our present emotions, cares and concerns. For example, upon

starting a new relationship, some people delete the social media photos that depict them with their previous partners, which can be a way to stress the importance and priority of the more recent bond over past ones.

The role that internet-enabled technology can have in giving salience to certain stories can be further appreciated when we consider some of the ways in which narrative self-understanding can be affected in mental ill-health. This can involve, for example, the emergence of multiple conflicting self-narratives and the difficulty to determine which ones are authentic. Some people with a diagnosis of mental illness can indeed feel uncertain as to whether certain emotions, desires, or actions are truly ‘theirs’ or are rather the product of their condition (a phenomenon that has been referred to as “self-illness ambiguity”) (Sadler, 2007). For instance, a social anxiety sufferer¹⁰ may wonder whether they are not a sociable person and do not enjoy the presence of others, or if these ways of thinking of themselves and related feelings and behaviours are just the product of their anxiety.¹¹

Our digital presence can certainly include multiple, and potentially conflicting narratives, and one could argue that certain uses of digital and social media can exacerbate self-ambiguity. For example, it is possible to present or forefront different narratives in different online spaces, and, especially if one’s social networks are not the same across these spaces, there may be no incentive or pressure to resolve tensions and create a cohesive, or at least coherent, story.

While this is a possibility that should be acknowledged, it is important to recognise that internet-enabled technology can be used in ways that facilitate ‘dis-ambiguation’. While being on the internet does not prevent the expression of conflicting self-narratives, when we determine that there are certain stories that we want to uphold and others that we want to reject, digital and social media offer tools that can help to prioritise or forefront the relevant stories.

If I come to the understanding that I am, or can be, a confident and outgoing person, I can shape my digital presence in a manner that corroborates, enhances, and gives centrality to this particular self-narrative. For example, I can post pictures of myself and my friends in cheerful circumstances, and make sure that these records remain easily accessible and prominent within my profile. For instance, I may create a photo album devoted to the social events of the last year, or include the relevant pictures among the ones that are “featured” (and thus remain visible) on my Facebook profile. This can help to achieve the re-alignment of one’s affects and narratives that has been associated with overcoming self-illness ambiguity (Dings and Glas 2020).

It may be objected that giving prominence to some autobiographical narratives over others on social media does not entail that we are no longer torn between different, conflicting narratives and unsure about who we are. In other terms, one may be confused or uncertain about their identity, even if no ambiguity is displayed by the stories on their social media profiles.

¹⁰ For a discussion of anxiety and self-illness ambiguity, and of self-experience and social anxiety in online interaction, see Bortolan (2022) and (2023) respectively. The observations I offer here regarding the phenomenology of social anxiety are also informed by my own experience of this condition.

¹¹ This is not to suggest that any narrative conflict or uncertainty is problematic. Rather, at issue here are instances of ambiguity that are particularly distressing or profound.

This is certainly possible; however, my suggestion here is not that giving salience to certain stories online will inevitably lead to the disappearance of self-ambiguity, but rather that it can contribute to lessen this type of experience. This is the case because narratives that are more prominent can be easier to remember and to engage with when reflecting on oneself and this may cement their centrality in our self-conception. As it will be discussed in the next section, narratives can shape emotions and behaviours in various ways, and the ones that are more prominent may do so more extensively due to the attention we are led to pay to them.

Another potential concern with the role that technology can play in helping us to resolve self-ambiguity is that the coherent narrative we may uphold on and through digital and social media may not be an authentic one. This worry may be compounded by the awareness that, as noticed before, “deception and misrepresentation” seem to be much easier to achieve on the internet (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004: 42).

In response to this concern, it is helpful to note that, while ambiguity can be resolved by putting to the fore inauthentic narratives, and this can be exacerbated online, some digital spaces can also facilitate authenticity because they provide opportunities for self-exploration that are lacking offline. This has to do with the fact that some means of computer-mediated activity and communication are more congenial to certain users than the equivalent offline options. For example, electronic journaling or compiling online photo albums may be preferred by some users in virtue of their portability or perceived environmental sustainability, thus making it the case that the tools that may be drawn upon to curate one’s story can be more easily available for some on the internet.

In addition, it is also important to note that the social dynamics that are integral to the storying of one’s life may be very different online, and, in some cases the internet may be the only environment in which authentic self-narratives can be fully enacted. This will be explored in the next section by considering the role of other people in the co-creation and validation of our stories.

4.3 Digital technology and narrative uptake

Finally, digital platforms, and in particular social media, can provide a range of opportunities to obtain uptake from others for our own narratives.¹² Life stories are not created in isolation, not just in the sense that what constitutes a ‘good’ story, or the types of stories that we can conceive, are concepts that are socially and culturally shaped (Bruner, 2004: 694). What is important to note in addition to this is that others can act as co-narrators of our stories, and can provide or deny support for the way in which we can conceive of ourselves.

Digital technology offers an array of manners in which this co-creation and negotiation of narrative identity can occur. From the very basic option of liking the way in which we depict experiences and events, to the possibility of commenting on,

¹² The notion of “uptake” here is used to indicate understanding and support on the part of an online audience in general, and not specifically to refer to the role of a hearer in relation to a speaker attempting to perform a speech act (for a discussion of which see, for example, McDonald, 2021).

expanding, or documenting what we share, others can become an integral part of our story-telling on the internet.

Online environments can also facilitate the upholding of one's own narratives by providing audiences that can validate and reinforce such narratives. For example, upon sharing a Facebook memory of an important achievement (e.g. a graduation or promotion), we may receive further recognition from others about how joyful and meaningful that event was. For instance, a friend may reminisce about how hard we worked to achieve that success and how happy we were when we could finally celebrate it.

The potential significance of these dynamics is highlighted once again by the consideration of how narrativity can be affected in mental ill-health. The latter is indeed often associated with experiences of loneliness and isolation (Krueger et al. 2023), which may result in being deprived of the possibility to co-narrate or co-create one's stories, as well as of the possibility to receive recognition from others of the validity and value of our narratives.

Certain uses of internet-enabled technology can counteract these dynamics by giving us multiple opportunities, and modalities, to connect with others and to receive social uptake for our stories. Relatedly, it is also important to consider that the environments in which online story-telling occurs can be very different from the ones in which life narratives are told and negotiated offline, and this may have some specific advantages.

An important aspect in this regard concerns the fact that some of the constraints and power structures that permeate face-to-face, embodied interaction may be weakened in internet spaces. In the context of in-person communication, we are mostly exposed to, and immediately aware of, the bodily and emotional expressions of our interlocutors. This means that we can get an almost instantaneous sense of how they feel about what we are saying and doing, and, in the case of self-narratives, whether they share or not our perspective. Online these dynamics can be weaker, and this is the case for various reasons.

In the first place, the interpersonal negotiation of our stories on the internet may not happen synchronously, as other people, for example, may respond to what we share at different points over time. Secondly, on social media, even when we are communicating in real time with someone (e.g. through a chat), we often do not see or hear them, and thus we are much less aware of their physical appearance, and the emotions and evaluations that this lets transpire.

As such, we can say that at least some digital environments reduce the pressure to read, react and conform to the point of view of the other that we may experience when we are face-to-face. This can be particularly the case for people who find themselves in offline environments that are critical of or hostile to some features of their identity. As observed by Aaron Ben-Ze'ev:

“Online relationships [...] encourage many people to present a more accurate picture of their true self, which is characterized as that version of self that a person believes she actually is, but is unable to present, or is prevented from presenting, to others in most situations. This is especially true for people whose

immediate apparent characteristics are not perceived in the most favorable light.” (2004: 43)

Online we can also exercise more control over who the audience of our stories is. Many digital and social media are built with the purpose of enabling us to connect with people who have something in common with us (for example because they share an interest for a certain topic or activity). In addition, even when platforms are not designed to facilitate the connection between users with common interests, we can exercise a degree of control in determining who we will be connected with (e.g. for example through the option of accepting or rejecting friend requests on Facebook).

Due to these features, online we can be more deliberate about who the co-creators and audiences of our narratives are, and we may enjoy a higher degree of freedom from the pressures that can shape face-to face interactions. As observed by Emma Gannon in the memoir of her digital experiences, “[a]nyone can hit ‘publish’ on their own version of their story” (2016: 227).

This ties in with important questions concerning the relationship between embodiment, or dis-embodiment, online and the self-transformative potential of internet-mediated experience. As pointed out earlier in this paper, some authors have drawn attention to the liberating and empowering potential of technology and virtual worlds, in so far as through these means it can be easier for us to challenge inflexible ideas and stereotypes concerning identity, and to enact the selves that we want to be. For example, in her book *Glitch Feminism*, Legacy Russell poignantly describes the way in which interacting online provided a space – not otherwise easily available to her off the internet – to shape her own identity as a female, queer, and Black person in the way that she wanted. As Russell explains:

“For my body [...] subversion came via digital remix, searching for those sites of experimentation where I could explore my true self, open and ready to be read by those who spoke my language. Online, I sought to become a fugitive from the mainstream, unwilling to accept its limited definition of bodies like my own.” (Russell, 2020: 6)

This view not only supports the claim that it is possible to authentically express who we are online, but it also corroborates the idea that through internet-enabled technology we can transform ourselves in ways that are identity-enhancing. In other terms, on the internet we can communicate who we are, and we can also change in ways that bring us closer to the person we aspire to be. The following description, by a player of an online virtual world, reported by Sherry Turkle (1997: 184) in her investigation of identity in the digital age further illustrates this point:

“You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever. You can just be whoever you want, really, whoever you have the capacity to be. You don’t have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. It’s easier to change the way people perceive you, because all they’ve got is what you show them. They don’t look at your body

and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see is your words.”

We can have a lot of flexibility concerning how we present ourselves on the internet, for example choosing to accentuate certain aspects over others, and putting centre stage our own understanding of our identity. Arguably, this can also help to challenge or reverse habitual dynamics, practices and power relations, for instance with regard to aspects of social identity like gender or disability, that may be the target of discrimination offline.

One could object to this idea by noting that on the internet there are fewer constraints concerning what contents and modes of communication are acceptable. For example, expressions of harsh criticism or vehement disagreement seem to be more frequent and less frowned upon online than offline.

This, however, can be addressed by stressing the importance of considering the specific features of online platforms and to be discerning in the use that we make of them. This is something that we may not be used or encouraged to do (as many online spaces are designed simply to maximise traffic and number of users), but that we can practice and advocate for. Similarly to what is the case with offline environments, it is key to acknowledge that the architecture of a space can make a significant difference to how the space is experienced by its users, and how it can harm and benefit them, and that changes to online environments can be called for to make them safer and more supportive of their users' wellbeing.

5 Objections and responses

So far, I have argued that internet-enabled technology can facilitate certain ways of engaging with one's self-narratives, supporting activities that are key to constitute, maintain, or transform our identities. This is rooted in the idea that identity is essentially interwoven with narrative self-understanding and hence technologies that can support the latter can also sustain the former.

Now I would like to consider a final set of objections that can be raised against this approach, showing that such objections can either be responded to, or they are not as problematic as they might appear at first.

5.1 Narratives are not enough to constitute or preserve identity

In the first place, one may object that the narratives that we engage with online are inconsequential to our activities and experience offline. After all, the fact that on the internet we can “story” ourselves in certain ways does not mean that in real life we will be living in accordance with that.

This is an objection that one could raise against my account of digital narrativity even if they were a supporter of a narrative theory of the self. Indeed, one could claim that there are specific features of virtual worlds that make what happens in them de-

coupled from life “away from the keyboard”¹³. In particular, we can observe that, in the offline world, we are typically under pressure to present self-narratives that cohere with certain factual aspects of our lives. This is the case because through face-to-face encounters, other people can easily ask us to provide evidence for our claims, and hold us accountable for being incorrect or misleading. Interacting offline can also foster accuracy with regard to the information we provide about our psychological states. Emotions and moods, for instance, are accompanied by distinct bodily expressions and gestures, and misalignment between the affective experiences we ascribe to ourselves and our bodily comportment may be easily picked up by others.

Things, however, can be very different when we are not encountering others face-to-face, especially when we are not interacting synchronously. For example, one may argue that the narratives we share online do not need to be ‘embodied’ or ‘enacted’ in a coherent way in front of an audience as much as offline narratives do. On social media, I can depict myself as cheerful and optimistic, but when I do so, I do not need to smile or to display a bodily posture that expresses cheerfulness or optimism: I could indeed be posting while crying and having a dejected appearance.

What these concerns get right, I think, is the acknowledgment that simulation or deception may be more difficult to spot in virtual worlds than when interacting face-to-face. However, it would be wrong to suggest that narratives that are told and endorsed sincerely online can easily remain separate from bodily experience and action offline.

Research on the relationship between experience and narrativity has indeed shown that there are multiple ways in which the stories that we tell feed into the way in which we feel and behave. For example, in previous work (Bortolan, 2021) I have argued that, by ascribing certain affective states to ourselves in our narratives, we become more likely to experience those states, or states similar to them. This is the effect, for instance, of the ability of a narrative to trigger emotions, and of the “cogency” of the imaginative processes that are involved in story-telling, that is the tendency of these processes to generate similar affective experiences to the ones that we are imagining (Wollheim, 1984: 79).

In addition, narratives can provide us with examples on which we can model our actions, facilitating the enactment of certain experiences. For example, certain self-narratives can provide us with concrete illustrations of how we can behave when experiencing certain emotions (e.g. describing or showing how we interact with others in situations in which we are confident or sociable). As such, the stories that we tell about ourselves can provide us with “scripts” that can shape future action (Bortolan, 2021: 489), and this can be either an involuntary or a voluntary process. On the one hand, the familiarity of certain self-narratives may indeed result in a greater propensity to spontaneously live up to them. On the other, certain narrative scripts can also be intentionally rehearsed in order to enhance our ability to reproduce what they depict. As such, using certain digital technologies can not only contribute to

¹³ The acronym “AFK” (which stands for “away from keyboard”) is employed by users of online games and other platforms to signal that they are physically away from their computer and so unable to interact in the online environment.

reinforcing existing habits, but also foster the adoption of different ones, if new self-narratives are endorsed.

The idea that internet-enabled technology can facilitate and support self-transformative processes is also consonant with the findings of some empirical research. Of particular interest in this regard is the so-called “Proteus effect”, according to which certain features of our digital persona can influence our behaviour not only online, but also offline.

The Proteus effect was originally discussed in the work of Yee and Bailenson (2007) who observed that, in a virtual reality setting, the characteristics of the avatars that were utilised had an impact on the behaviour of the users. For example, the users with the more attractive avatars tended to walk closer to their interlocutors and to disclose more information when interacting with them. In another experiment, Yee and Bailenson found that the height of the avatar had an impact on the participants’ attitudes during a negotiation, as “participants who had taller avatars were more willing to make unfair splits in negotiation tasks than those who had shorter avatars, whereas participants with shorter avatars were more willing to accept unfair offers than those who had taller avatars” (Yee & Bailenson, 2007: 285). Further research by Yee and colleagues showed that the use of avatars with certain features can impact also subsequent in-person interactions (Yee et al., 2009).

This research originally focused on the impact of specific “physical” aspects of the avatars (e.g. their height) (Paul et al., 2022). However, recent work has also examined the influence of more general or abstract features. For example, Paul and colleagues (2022) have explored how the fact that digital identities are not subject to the restrictions that constrain physical persons (e.g. susceptibility to illness) can influence their users. In particular, through two experiments conducted in the context of the pandemic of Covid-19, it was found that users who were able to adopt a new identity as an avatar in a social virtual world were less afraid of contracting Covid-19 and more psychologically resilient (also when compared with users who were asked to create avatars in a social media platform).

This research focuses on the use of avatars in virtual worlds, and, in the case of the studies conducted by Paul and colleagues (2022), on the effects of using an avatar that does not represent one’s physical self. However, it is plausible that similar dynamics may be present when we engage with certain self-narratives online as the users of social networks or other platforms. As outlined above, this is the case due to the ways in which narrativity can impact affectivity, and how stories can scaffold behaviours that are consistent with them. This is also compatible with the idea that the effects of online story-telling could be potentiated through the use of avatars whose attributes are consistent with the features that one is ascribed through their self-narratives. For example, stories that portray the narrator as confident and sociable could influence the person’s self-experience and actions more when the narrator can adopt an avatar with consonant features.¹⁴

¹⁴ In support of this idea, one could point to the success of the use of virtual reality in the treatment of some forms of mental ill-health. In these cases, users acquire or reinforce certain capacities (e.g. to deal with some stressors) by interacting in certain virtual scenarios (cf. Freeman et al., 2017). It is arguable that, in these instances, the stories that are enacted in the virtual world (e.g. how to respond to anxiety-inducing

What I have argued so far in this section should dispel the worry that internet-mediated narratives cannot play a role in the constitution and transformation of the self. However, one could still be concerned that these narratives, more often than not, lead to a weakening or loss of self-identity. In other terms, the concern can be raised that, rather than preserving or transforming our identity in ways that are consistent with who we are – online narratives tend to change us in manners that entail a loss of authenticity.

This objection correctly identifies a dynamic that can occur online (as well as offline), as it is indeed possible to lose oneself or to become someone else through the endorsement of certain self-narratives. However, while this is a possibility, there is no reason to think that this would be bound to occur more frequently due to the use internet-enabled technology.

In the first sections of this study, I have illustrated some of the reasons that animate pessimism about self-expression and self-fashioning online. These include the idea that forms of embodiment that differ from those imbued in face-to-face interaction hinder the capacity to engage in practices that are key to authentic self-constitution.

However, throughout this paper, I have offered reasons to reject the concerns of the pessimists, by showing how certain uses of technology can support narrative processes that are intertwined with relevant affective experiences, and are self-constitutive. This should have assuaged the worry that online activity and interaction are intrinsically more likely to lead to inauthenticity, in so far as digital technology does not prevent us from entertaining mental states and performing actions that can sustain our identities (and indeed can facilitate these processes).

Acknowledging the specificity of online platforms, we should recognise that not every space on the internet is best suited to support self-narratives that reflect who we are or scaffold changes that are identity-preserving. Nevertheless, what I have shown is that at least certain designs and uses of technology have the capacity to do so, and that the relevant forms of self-constitution may be different from those which are available to us offline. This is the case because internet technology can favour certain modes of narrative expression and creation (e.g. written rather than verbal, or via a-synchronous rather than synchronous interaction). In addition, for some people, the possibility to self-narrativise and the social uptake necessary for this to be effective, may be available only or predominantly online.

As such, whether virtual environments more often than not pose a threat to authenticity is, to an extent, an empirical question, in so far as it depends on how these environments are structured and utilised, which is a matter over which designers and users respectively have choice. However, the insights developed in this study also suggest that, in virtue of some of their specific features, some internet spaces may provide distinct opportunities for self-constitution, which are more difficult to pursue in the offline world. A careful use of cyberspaces may thus strengthen and broaden the engagement with our self-narratives, supporting and expanding the ability to be, or become more, ourselves.

situations) may provide users with ‘models’ or ‘scripts’ of how to react in particular circumstances, and this can facilitate the adoption of these patterns of behaviour in the offline world.

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