

## **THE MAKING OF ONLINE IDENTITY**

*The use of creative method to support young people in their reflection on age and gender*

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**Abstract.** In the .GTO.project our ambition is to study how young people (10 to 14 years old) in Estonia and Sweden construct and normalise gender and age, as markers of identity and identity development, in their online interactions. After conducting interview studies on how young people experience on- and offline interactions, and their intertwining, as well as online ethnographic studies of online presentations, we went on with the third phase of the project: creative workshops with young people. In these workshops, young people in groups of four were to create fictitious online characters. In the analysis of these, we focus on how power differentials and identity markers such as age and gender are constructed and negotiated.

### **1. Social Networking Sites and Identity**

The user of digital media can be described as a content producer in a participatory media culture (Jenkins, 2006) who moves between the roles of consumer and producer. This possibility of taking active part in the creation of media content is considered (c.f. Poster, 1995) one of the characteristics that distinguish digital media from traditional media (television, radio, newspapers, and so on) and the more passive (no real possibility of influencing or creating content) forms of media consumption. Obviously, this trait of digital media has been all the more prominent with e.g. web 2.0 services, putting increased emphasis on user-produced and/or user-influenced content. As the user also can become a producer, or “produser” with the terminology of Bruns (2006), the mutually affecting relation between the media and the user does become a central quality of digital media and digital media use. In this respect, digital media are

constantly “under construction” (as was the insistence of the ever-present logo of mid-1990’s Internet), challenging the notions of final version and definite truth.

Young people interacting with digital media are thus “producers” not just of media content, but also metaphorically can be understood as active “producers” in the construction of personal identity. When creating a gaming avatar, when writing on their personal blog, or when publishing personal information on a SNS (social networking site), the user is interacting with the representation of oneself. This self is created before the eyes of the “producer” and hence also open to negotiation. In the postmodern notion, identity can be described as fluid (Turkle, 1995), non-stable and nomadic (Braidotti, 1994; Kennedy, 2006). In line with this, Valentine (2004) refers to West and Fenstermaker and “the intersection of identities in terms of a doing, a more fluid coming together, of contingencies and discontinuities, clashes and neutralizations, in which positions, identities, and differences are made and unmade, claimed and rejected” (Valentine 2004 p.14). Inherent in this view of fluidity is also that identity is incomplete (Haraway, 1991), fragmented (Turkle, 1995) and partial (Haraway, 1991). This means that the identity is a multidimensional relational phenomenon (Holm Sørensen, 2001). An underlying assumption with Turkle, and to some degree also with Haraway, as with many others (e.g. Bruckman, 1993; Stone, 1995; Petkova, 2005) is that the possibility of acting anonymously on the internet will foster not only identity explorations but also carry with it emancipatory power (Rheingold, 1993; Stone, 1995). Fascinating as these studies and arguments may be, identity exploration or the construction of new or alternative identities, at least in the meaning of presenting yourself on the Internet as someone (or something) else than your actual physical self, are rare. Rather, Internet identity construction seems to invite to identity work as grounded in everyday experiences (Baym, 1998; Mowbray, 2000). If there are dimensions of experimentation, this identity work seems to be more of “identity tourism” (Nakamura, 2001) repeating social structures and hierarchies. Still, the participation on different social networking sites do imply a certain focus on the re-presentation of the self (Hernwall, 2009). This re-presentation of the self frequently mirror the dualistic gendered, aged, racial (etc.) power structures of the physical world (Cooper, 2007; Li, 2005; Nakamura, 2002; Siibak, 2010). Hence, online communication seem to encourage work on the complex weave of societal power structures that make up the fluid and relational identity, rather than identity explorations. On the contrary, the youth on SNS seem to construct identities that are highly influenced by the media and advertisement industries (Nakamura, 2002; Siibak, 2006, 2007, 2008; Young 2008; Strano 2008; Mikkola, Oinas and Kumpulainen, 2008). It is thus likely to conclude that the growing distribution as well as use of internet and social media affects the conditions for identity construction. One of the most pregnant aspects of this is how the use of the internet has become intertwined with everyday life.

In the.GTO.project<sup>1</sup> we have focused on how young people (age 10 to 14 years old) construct and normalize identity markers such as age and gender in their online

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<sup>1</sup> The research project “Construction and normalisation of gender online among young people in Estonia and Sweden” (2009-2012). See also <http://mt.sh.se/GTO>.

interactions. Based on experiences from interviews and online observations, we set up creative workshops with young people (age 14 years old) inviting them to construct fictitious online characters. Our focus here was especially on their use of power differentials and identity markers such as age and gender.

## **2. Age, Gender – and Intersectionality**

When the affordances of a popular SNS are related to the subject's life-world, what takes shape as affordances are the interference of cultural values, societal expectations and personal motives. Taking that interference as a starting ground for understanding human action, the affordances are developed out of a sociocultural environment in consequence making them inextricably intertwined with power differentials and identity markers such as gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, class, etc. Or, in other words, affordances carry with them factual as well as experienced power structures, power differentials and identity markers. With inspiration from intersectionality theory (Lykke, 2003, 2010; McCall, 2005; de los Reyes and Mulinari, 2005) the power differentials and identity markers "age" and "child" can be understood as intersecting with other such analytic categories as gender, ethnicity, class, etc. Such categories should be interpreted as sociocultural categorizations that are not fixed categories but mutually influencing and influenced by human interpretation and action (c.f. Lykke, 2010). Thereby we assemble structure, process and subjectivity and advocate a doing gender perspective that "characterizes identity as a fluid coming together" (Valentine, 2004, p.14).

Previously in the GTO project we have studied (a) how young people experience the meeting between on- and offline world with regard to online identity constructions, and (b) how young people construct identity in online social networks. Semi-structured interviews with the tweens (Siibak, 2010) and visual analysis of profile images (Siibak, 2009a, 2009b) indicate that in order to gain acceptance by the wider online community, the representation of males and females in the contemporary media and posing strategies of high-ranking online community members are often used as role-models when constructing one's online identity. These findings confirm the claims of Horsely (2006) according to whom the celebrities often provide a "reference point" for the general public through which personal identity can be understood. Furthermore, Horsely (2006, p. 196) emphasises the social function of popular media that serves as a "map" for upon which explorations of identity may be charted". The findings of our previous studies (Siibak 2010, 2009a, 2009b) suggests that Estonian girls seem to share a strong need to earn the acceptance and recognition of their peers through emphasising their looks, as being 'cute' is considered to be an important aspect forming the overall value standard among young girls. Our research (Siibak 2010, 2009a, 2009b; Siibak and Hernwall, 2011; Hernwall and Siibak, 2011) also indicates that SNS profile images of girls are often built upon their interpretations of womanhood, which does not just involve wearing make-up (especially lip gloss and eye liner) and extensive accessories, but also include the style of posing and facial expressions. From this, we can conclude that with regard to their expressed experiences as well as their online actions, age is an important marker; gender is being understood stereotypically; the sexual identity of

both girls and boys are stereotyped, even though the boys are less sexualized; boys have strong opinion about heteronormativity (and especially on male homosexuals); that comments and feedback on postings are very important and hence the choice of pictures to publish is a very serious matter.

With these tentative results, we wanted to work together with young people of this age, to further understand how identity is constructed and normalized in online everyday interactions.

### 3. Creative Methods

We made use of an approach David Gauntlett (2007, p. 3) has referred to as “the new creative methods” where people are asked “to spend *time* applying their playful or creative *attention* to the act of making something symbolic or metaphorical, and then *reflecting* on it”. Although some authors have also criticized the approach mainly for the “naïve empiricism” and “naïve political arguments” (Buckingham 2009, p. 635) that have sometimes been used when listing to the strengths of the approach, and others (Bragg, 2011; Piper & Frankham, 2007) have referred to a number of unique challenges such methods offer, we decided to explore the potential of this approach for analyzing how (gender) identity is constructed by the tweens. Hence, when planning our workshop we took into both the positive feedback as well as the criticisms the approach has received and relied on experiences of other researchers who have made use of action-oriented research methods in order to study some phenomenon in the life-worlds of children or young people.

The advocates of visual and creative research methods argue that the act of ‘creating’ something is not only elemental to the human condition but has also “spanned the evolution of humankind” (Posser and Loxely, 2008, p. 32). In this context it is important to note that David Gauntlett (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006, p. 2) regards creative methods as “an *enabling* methodology”, referring to the fact that the main idea of the method is based on the assumption that people have something interesting to communicate and they can do it in a creative manner. Furthermore, according to Gauntlett (2007, p. 182) making use of creative methods gives research participants the opportunity to communicate different kinds of information, i.e. information that might not be gained when using more traditional qualitative approaches like focus-groups or individual interviews. For instance, Gauntlett (2007, p. 115) has argued that when getting children actively engaged in the research process itself allows the youth to “communicate what was important to them” and also to “bring into surface” impressions and feelings of a subject matter which more conventional research methods may not access (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 126).

### 4. Student Workshops on Identity Construction Online

We hosted two workshops with students from junior high school. One workshop took place in Stockholm, Sweden, and another one in Tartu, Estonia; with Swedish and Estonian pupils respectively. In both cases we had rented a room outside of the school environment; in Estonia in an activity centre and in Sweden in the local Community

Centre. We did meet with the pupils beforehand, when visiting them in class and presenting ourselves as well as the research project. At this occasion we also introduced the coming workshop, describing the workshop method, the theme of the workshop (“what meaning online world has in the lifeworld of young people”), and emphasized the fact that taking part of the workshop should not be seen as part of one’s schoolwork (i.e. they were not to be assessed, even though their teachers urged them to participate). We were also explicit on the fact that all the material produced during the workshops were confidential and using only for the academic purposes and the participants and their opinions expressed during the workshops were to be anonymous. Each student was also given a written description of the research project and the aims of the workshop which they could take home to show to their parents.

Both workshops comprised of 13-14 year old students who attended the same class and hence, knew each other well. Our final sample comprised of those students who were interested in taking part of the study and whose parents has signed the written consent form stating that their child may participate. There were 17 students participating in Tartu workshop, and 16 students took part of the workshop in Stockholm; in both cases the students were randomly grouped into groups of four-five during the workshop.

In the first part of the workshop the participants were introduced to the theme “Construct an online character, age 10 years old” (see Figure 1). Then they were to make up this character together in small groups by drawings and accompanied with written statements/characterizations. Each group had at their table papers, pens, crayons, post-it notes, etc. to use freely. We did not give any instructions nor did we mention the gender of the imaginary character the students were to construct. Each group could make this decision by themselves. All in all, two imaginary girl and two boy characters were developed during both of the workshops.

In the following stage of the workshop, the students were to draw and describe the possible social media platforms this imaginary character might be using. These two stages were then repeated, but with instructions of making the character 12, and eventually 14, years old coupled with written statements. After having drawn and written about the 12 years old character, the young were handed laptop computers (all of which had Internet access) and were given an opportunity to continue working on constructing this imaginary character on the computer. Although all the groups both in Estonia and in Sweden hence decided to construct a 14 year-old character by creating them a profile on the Internet, Estonian students did not make any drawings of the 14 years old character. Rather they went straight on continue developing the imaginary characters for whom they had already created “personal” Facebook profiles. The Swedish pupils did make drawings of also the 14 years old, as well as updating their online profiles.

All these assignments given during the workshops were based on the assumption that sketches drawn and multimodal content produced by the youth in our study are indications of virtual identity constructions and online practices among the young which have caught their attention and have thus in turn framed particular aspects of the overall (design)-message. Therefore, as the participants in our study could delete, add, modify all the content they produced during the workshop, we believe their creative and playful explorations of (online) identities of tweens contain a mixture of their real as

well as fictional opinions (e.g. interests from (pop)-culture, celebrities they refer to, etc.), feelings and battles they associate and encounter in their everyday lives as tweens. In other words, as “the design rests on the possibility of choice” (Kress, 2010, p. 28), we can learn a lot “from the stories that told and the way they are told” (Gauntlett, 2007, p.103) through such creative processes.



*Figure 1.* Scene from the workshop (Estonia).

Thus, when starting off with hand-drawn sketches we did encourage them to take as a starting point their everyday life experiences and associations of online identity work. This proved to be a good strategy. When handed out the computers at a later stage of the workshop, the focus did shift from not just the collectively created character to fascination with findings on the Internet. But also, the focus shifted from the group conversation to interaction with the screen. The first phase of the workshop could perhaps be characterized as tween peer norms about online identity work, whereas the later phase could be described as shift into internet culture as a source of inspiration in this identity work. Furthermore, as we are interested in identity constructions among tweens, rather than individual identity processes, working in groups give us two advantages: (i) the identities constructed was based in a joint reflexive process, and (ii) we could take part of this process by talking with the groups as well as we did make video and audio recordings of the group works. In other words, for the sake of the project we considered it to be important to have the students work in groups as Gauntlett (2007, p. 96) has argued that group engagement in creative processes has “parallels with how we come to form understandings in everyday life, through interactions with peers”.

At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that the creative content produced by the tweens in Estonia and Sweden not only reflect their interests but focus also on “the assumed interest of the recipient of the sign” (Kress, 2010, p. 78). In other words, the narratives created can “also convey the subjective attitudes about the persons to whom the narrative is addressed (Deese, 1983, p. xv). In this context however, it is important to take into account the intended audience addressed with these creative assignments: our research team could be seen as the main audience for the drawings, whereas in case of the SNS profile entries the intended audience consisted both of the users added into the “friends” lists as well as all the other users of the SNS communities.

Still, as the relative trustworthiness of image-based research is “best achieved via multiple images in conjunction with words” (Prosser, 1998, p. 106), in the final phase of the workshop we asked each group to present and explain their work done to all the others and a more general discussion on the theme of online identity creation followed. We asked each group to interpret their own work so as not to impose our own, adult and researcher’s interpretations and meanings (see Gauntlett, 2007, p. 125) to the drawings and SNS profile entries of the tweens. In this respect, as suggested by Harper (1998, p. 35) “the researcher becomes a listener” whose intention should be to keep “the consequent interest in and acknowledgment of the co-construction of knowledge between participant and researcher” (Toon, 2008, p. 22). In the following analysis of the workshop we also show some illustrative examples.

## 5. Analysis of the Workshop Material

Buckingham (2009) has argued that when analyzing the creative artifacts like drawings, researchers should be reminded not only to focus on the oral (or written) interpretations of the makers and the group and by doing so dismissing the visual dimension of their study. Although it might appear very tempting to rely only on the explanations and descriptions made by the participants, Buckingham (2009) warns the researchers not to take everything the participants say at face value. In our study we also found the theory of reading images by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) and multimodality by Kress (2010) helpful when interpreting the visual data gathered. However, as there is no “one size fits all” approach” (Buckingham 2009) when analyzing visuals, we do acknowledge the need for additional theories and ways for understanding the data produced through creative methods.

The analysis of the online characters created by the groups, tentatively suggests that age and gender are the most prominent markers of identity. Furthermore they are also important power differentials as they are intertwined with not just each other, but also with the possible actions of the subject.

In this early stage of the analysis, we like to illustrate the kind of multimodal works produced by the young at the workshops. All of the groups made (a) drawings using paper and crayons accompanied with illustrative/descriptive written text and (b) an online user profile for the created persona. The first illustration is from a group at the Swedish workshop, developing the persona “Jenny” (see Figure 2). In this illustration Jenny is 10 years old.



10 years    Geek for real    Cool for real  
 Jenny [name of school]    Fjortis  
 1 girl "friend" from school  
 Half asian  
 Much makeup  
 Sits much at FB  
 Has a blog  
 Skip school  
 Bad grades  
 Cocky. No real friends  
 FALSE  
 Smokes, drinks  
 Single mother, alcoholic

Figure 2. Jenny. Age 10 years old. Sweden. (our translation on the right)

Thomson (2008) has argued that the analysis of images in general, and the ones made by children and young people in particular, needs to be a highly conscious activity as young people's images "may not be amendable to straightforward adult readings" (Thomson, 2008, p. 10). This is also one of the reasons why we asked the young to both draw the imaginary character, write the textual description of the character and later to orally present this work to the others, as we believed that only the "picture and words together" (Gauntlett, 2007, p.107) form a meaningful package which could then be analyzed further by social scientists.

One immediate impression is the difference in degree of details in the drawings. The Estonian drawings all held a similar level of accuracy (strictness), whereas the Swedish drawings differed greatly. Some of the Swedish drawings were made in a particularly naïve childish stick drawing like style. This can perhaps be said to mirror in the atmosphere in the respective rooms of the workshop: Both were out of school settings. This was a deliberate choice of ours, as we did want to give an impression of increased freedom/no grading as compared to the school (classroom) setting.

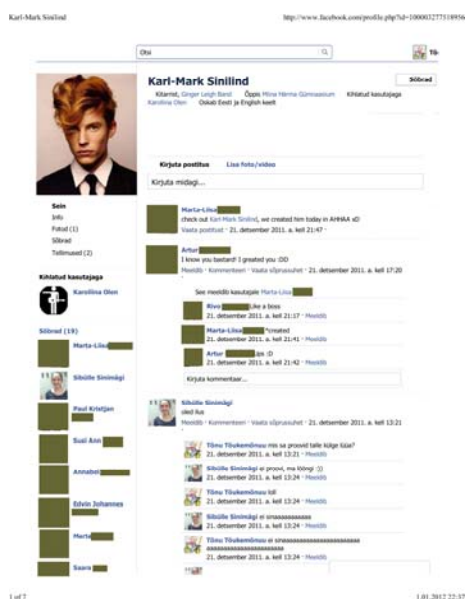
One obvious thing visible in the drawings, is how they dramatize – and perhaps even over-dramatized – the changes in the character drawn. i.e. they were growing into drugs, depressions, family problems, school problems, etc. But also, when being 14 years old, many – if not all – of these problems had been if not sorted out so at least coped with.

Furthermore, there seems to an interesting, and important, relationship between the social status of the character and his/hers use of SNS and computers in general. One interesting theme in the Swedish material is how a massive use of SNS, computer games, etc. seems to be intertwined with social exclusion and/or non-acceptable social



behaviour. The most striking example here is Jenny, age 10, who is overdramatizing her appearance and Facebook use, trying (desperately, according to the youth/authors) to appear older than she is. Consequently, when using computers, and SNS, less frequently, the characters also have more friends, are beginning to be more socially accepted, and also get better grades.

At the same time, as was most clear in the Estonian workshop, SNS was harbouring intimate friendships and online relationships. These Estonian characters eventually were acquainted online and developed interactions between each others, social interactions that did continue also for some time after the workshop ended (see Figure 3).



Karl-Mark Sinilind  
Guitarist, Ginder Leigh Band  
Studied: name of he school  
Engaged with Karoliina Olen  
Speaks Estonian and English

First poster on the Wall (comment originally in English): check out Karl-Mark Sinilind, we created him today in AHHA xD

Second poster on the Wall (comments originally in English): I know you bastard! I created you :DD

1 reply: Like a boss

2 reply: \*created

Poster: Ups :D

Sibülle Sinimägi<sup>2</sup>: you are nice

Tõnu Tõukemõnuu<sup>3</sup>: what, you are trying to hit on him?

Sibülle Sinimägi: am not trying, I am hitting on him :))

Tõnu Tõukemõnuu: stupid

Sibülle Sinimägi: no yoooouu

Tõnu Tõukemõnuu:

no yoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Figure 3. Karl-Mark. 14 years old. Estonia (our translation on the right).

In the later phase of the workshops each of the groups was supposed to introduce and comment upon the characters they had created and all the other participants were

<sup>2</sup> Sibülle Sinimägi was an imaginary character created by the participants of the Tartu workshop.

<sup>3</sup> Tõnu Tõukemõnuu was another imaginary character created by the participants of the Tartu workshop.

encouraged to ask for questions and voice their own opinions of the characters the others had come up with. We believe that structuring the workshops in this manner helped us to establish a “community within which meaning was negotiated and constructed” (Toon, 2008, p. 25). Furthermore, it also allowed us as researchers to observe not only how young people give meaning to social experiences (Denzin & Lincoln 1998), but also to witness how participants were encouraging each other to collaborate and to interpret the drawings made by others. In this respect, while specifying each others’ answers and questioning each other’s replies, the young participants in our workshops were actually constructing their shared reality. In fact, as creative research methods enable the research participants to actively to engage in the research process itself we believe the method offered the young an opportunity to “communicate what was important to them” (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 115) and thus to “bring into surface” impressions and feelings of a subject matter which might be more difficult to grasp with more conventional research methods (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 126).

## 6. Concluding Comment

In this article, we have described an example of implementing creative research methodology in a research study involving young people, so as to illustrate what kind of empirical data has emanated from this process, and also the kind of results the analysis will bring. The workshops conducted with Estonian and Swedish tweens respectively give us a richer and more complex empirical data, allowing us to continue working on analyzing the gathered material further.

There are obviously a number of qualities emanating from inviting young people to take active part in the process of creating empirical data. One such quality is, as Gauntlett (2007) stresses, that the informants are given the possibility to communicate aspects that are important to them. This is especially noteworthy as the participants in this workshop were young people, whose voices and opinions are often considered of lesser value (underscored by not having the right to vote). In that, we need to be sensitive to the interests and experiences of the persons invited. Hence, the findings of a number of more empirical studies which made use of more traditional research methodologies were used to form the frame of reference for the themes we focused upon during the workshops. Another quality with creative research methods such as the workshop here described is that it generates *another kind of empirical data*, making it possible to reach new kinds of understanding of the phenomena studied. The latter will be also our next challenge.

## Acknowledgements

This article was written as part of the project ‘Construction and Normalisation of Gender Online among Young People in Estonia and Sweden’ (the.GTO.project), financed by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (Östersjöstiftelsen). Andra Siibak is also thankful for the support of the ETF grant no. 8527 and target financed project SF0180017s07.

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