



AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Aalborg Universitet

Understanding Social Networking

On Young People s Construction and Co construction of Identity Online

Larsen, Malene Charlotte

Published in:
Online Networking - Connecting People

Publication date:
2008

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Larsen, M. C. (2008). Understanding Social Networking: On Young People s Construction and Co construction of Identity Online. In K. Sangeetha (Ed.), *Online Networking - Connecting People* (Icfai University Press).

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Understanding Social Networking: On Young People's Construction and Co-construction of Identity Online

Malene Charlotte Larsen
PhD Candidate
Department of Communication and Psychology
Aalborg University
malenel@hum.aau.dk

ABSTRACT

As digital spaces *online social networking sites* offer an exceptional arena for the individual and social lives of young people today. In this paper I illustrate how young people maintain friendships and thereby continuously construct and co-construct their identity online. Based on my analysis I argue that social networking sites can be seen as a continuation of young people's everyday (offline) lives for which reason the majority of them strive to be as sincere as possible – in short to be themselves. The paper is based on an extensive ethnographical investigation of a Danish social networking site.

Keywords

Social networking, social networking sites, online, youth, identity, friendship, virtual ethnography, field work

INTRODUCTION

There are many different perspectives on online social networking. The perspective(s) one has will be very different whether one is a parent with a teenage daughter on MySpace, a marketing executive interested in the target group "14 to 20", a journalist looking for the next news story on young people and new media, a youngster using a social networking site as part of everyday life or a researcher investigating how young people are using social networking sites.¹ Non-users such as the news media, parents, teachers or other adults often talk about social networking sites from an outsider's perspective. That tends to be predominantly critical and reinforce some of the prejudices or moral panics that are surrounding young people's use of new communication technologies. Many people fail to see the individual and social perspectives that young people's use of social networking sites have. This is due to a lack of understanding what online social networking for teenagers is really about. This paper mainly focuses upon online social networking from a user-point-of-view and will provide new and

¹ For a discussion of the many different perspectives people have on youth and online social networking see (Larsen 2007).

thoroughly research-based perspectives on online social networking and youth. The latter are important to include in an otherwise one-sided public debate on the subject.

The paper is based on my own process of understanding young people's use of social networking sites through a seven month virtual ethnographical investigation (Hine 2000) carried out by me (Larsen 2005). The online ethnography was carried out on the most popular – but also most publicly criticized – social networking site in Denmark called Arto and especially focused on youngsters between the age of 13 and 17, as the analysis revealed these were the core users.

Based on my analysis I illustrate how those core users construct their identities through socio-cultural practices on www.arto.dk as part of their everyday life. Especially, the paper addresses questions such as:

- Which means do the users utilize to portray themselves and each other on Arto.dk?
- What kinds of relationships are sought after on the social networking site?
- What role do friendships play in the young people's construction of identity?
- What does the site mean to them and how can it be seen as a continuation of their offline lives?

CASE DESCRIPTION

Arto is the biggest social networking site in Denmark with approximately half a million users out of a five million population. It is estimated that 80% of all Danish teenagers have a profile on Arto. Primarily, they use the site to communicate with their existing (offline) friends from school or their local environment. Secondly, they find new (online) friends with whom they very seldom meet face to face. The site dates back to 1998 before social networking was even a concept in Denmark. At first the site was merely a repository for jokes and was created by an 18-year old high school student as a spare time activity. After a while he thought it would be fun to create a guest book where the users of the site could comment on the jokes, put up their own or write messages back and forth. Instantly, the guest book function became more popular than the jokes themselves and from that point on Arto developed into a social networking site and grew bigger and bigger just by word of mouth between Danish youngsters.



Figure 1: The front page of Arto.dk, December 2006.

There are many different features on Arto which also exists in an international version (www.arto.com). Based on my long-term observation and familiarity with the site I have divided the features into four overarching categories that also cover different types of actions carried out by the users:

- The social and contact enabling features (such as the guest book, the chat section, the debate forum, the clubs etc.).
- The personal and branding related features (such as the profile, the picture gallery, the blog, the notice board, the profiling messages on the front page etc.).
- Entertainment (such as games, videos, jokes, articles etc.).
- Support and practical information (such as rules, safety guidelines and the support section).

In my study I especially focused on the actions carried out by means of the personal and branding related features and the social and contact enabling features as I found them to be predominant on the website. Also, the features in those two categories (especially the guest book, the profile and the picture gallery with the comment function) were pointed out by the users as the ones they used most frequently. By focusing on those types of central social actions I analysed how identity construction and friendships unfold on the website. In addition

to the virtual ethnography my study consisted of an online questionnaire, a focus group interview, informal conversation and an analysis of news media discourses on social networking and youth in Denmark.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of the study is rooted in Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) (Scollon 2001; Scollon 2001). MDA distinguishes itself from other discourse studies by focusing on social actions, rather than focusing mainly on written text or language. As a consequence the unit of analysis is moved towards a focus on the crucial social actions carried out by the central social actors within the field of study. This has to do with the conviction that discursive practice is one form of social practice, but not the only one. The meaning lies within the actions (Norris and Jones 2005) because what social actors say in and about their social practice may not be equivalent with their habitus. This means that, in a study like mine, interviews, questionnaires and media discourses cannot stand alone for which reason identification of social actions from the overall ethnographical approach is central.

The methodological framework of the study also originates from the Scollons. In their book from 2004 they propose a field guide for carrying out a Nexus Analysis (Scollon and Scollon 2004). In a nexus analysis one analyses a Nexus of Practice² (which Arto can be analysed as) by going through three phases: engaging, navigating and changing the nexus of practice:



Figure 2: The three phases in a nexus analysis (Scollon and Scollon 2004).

² A 'Nexus of Practice' is defined by Scollon as "a recognizable grouping of a set of mediated actions. [...] ... the concept of the nexus of practice simultaneously signifies a genre of activity and the group of people who engage in that activity." (Scollon 2001). In a nexus of practice the actors are rather loosely connected and the concept differs from Wenger's term 'Community of Practice' where people have a mutual engagement, a shared repertoire and a joint enterprise (Wenger 1998). A nexus of practice is not necessarily a 'place', but every linkage of a set of repeatable actions which are recognized by a social group could be view as a nexus of practice.

In the first phase one is concerned with obtaining a 'zone of identification', finding the central social actors, observing the interaction order and establishing the most prominent cycles of discourse within the nexus of practice one is studying (Scollon and Scollon 2004). For me this first phase consisted of the data collection. The virtual ethnographical investigation, which is the largest part of the data, was conducted as participatory observation where I as a researcher created my own profile and filled it out with personal information in order to obtain my "zone of identification" (Scollon and Scollon 2004).

My objective with the profile was openly communicated to the users. During the seven months I was online on Arto every day for at least one and a half hour. I documented my observations and experiences in field notes and took several hundred screen dumps of the site.

Also I used the "friend book", which is a tool on Arto, to conduct a qualitative questionnaire with the users who became my "Arto friends". I carried out a focus group interview with 15-16 year olds who had been users for at least two years. I conducted a media-content-survey and a public opinion survey (also called "What's in the news?-survey) (Scollon and Scollon 2004). Here I collected all press coverage on Arto and asked the users what they had heard about Arto in the news. Moreover, I had lots of informal conversations with users both on the site and through MSN Messenger which the majority of the youngsters use as a supplemental communication tool after getting acquainted with new people on the site. In several cases the communication I had with the users was initiated by them after having read my profile text.

By using those different methods I collected four types of data which are recommended by the Scollons: members' generalizations (via the qualitative questionnaire), neutral ('objective') observations (via the screen dumps and field notes), individual members' experiences (via focus group interview and chat with users) and observer's interaction with members (via using my profile for participatory observations and virtual ethnography) (Scollon 2001; Scollon and Scollon 2004).

In the second phase of a Nexus Analysis one navigates and maps the data material. In my case this was carried out through a mediated discourse analysis focusing on the central social actions carried out by the users of Arto. The analysis was organised in four overarching themes which I established as the most predominant cycles of discourse: a sincerity theme, a body theme, a love theme and a friendship theme – some of which I will return to in the analysis part of this paper.

In the third phase, changing the nexus of practice, the researcher looks at how her analysis has changed the field of study. Based on my analysis of Arto I have been giving many talks or

lectures on schools for both users (children and young people) and especially non-users (such as worried parents, teachers, social educators, librarians and policemen). Also, I have had more than 70 press appearances in Danish media about my research results and young people's use of Arto, and it seems that my analysis has had an impact on the nexus of practice in question and has helped move or differ the focus of the public debate. Thus, I have used my research results actively, which in Scollon and Scollon's opinion is part of the purpose of a Nexus Analysis.

Before moving onto the actual analysis I will touch upon how I as an ethnographer gained my 'zone of identification' on Arto. The validity of the analysis relies on understanding what the users do online. Therefore, obtaining the 'zone of identification', experiencing what it is like to be a user and being recognized as one by the other users is crucial in order to carry out a virtual ethnography.

Entering and engaging with Arto as a nexus of practice

In late 2004 when I started my study every Danish youngster knew what Arto was, but very few people above the age of 18 had a clue that the site even existed. However, this changed as the news media started to report on single cases where young people had been bullying or threatening each other on the site. Equally, they reported that the site was an eldorado for predators and paedophiles, and that especially young girls were exposing themselves in an inappropriate or even soft porn manner (Larsen 2005).³ Of course some of those things did take place on Arto from time to time, which would be inevitable with so many young people present on the site. However, the media presented it as if those were the only things happening on Arto thus leading parents, teachers and even politicians to claim that the site should be closed down. On many schools the site was blocked and a lot of parents banned their children from using the site and forced them to delete their profiles. Many youngsters found it unfair and feared that the site would be closed down. During the acute public debate no one asked the questions: 'Why is Arto so popular?' 'What do the youngsters use it for?' and 'What does the site mean for their social and individual lives?' I set out to answer those questions for which reason I created my Arto profile.

³ For a discussion on Arto in the news see (Larsen 2006).



Figure 3: My profile on Arto.dk, September 2005.

It was my experience that the users treated me as an equal user, even though I was at least 10-15 years older than most of them and therefore not part of the group of people (between 12 and 17 years old) they themselves consider to be the target group (Larsen, 2005). This equal treatment was visible when they wrote to me using similes, heart symbols, "<3", or ending their messages with writing "kisses", "hugs" or other informal greetings which they use among themselves. Often they wrote to me asking "Hi, what are you doing?", which is the most common message between 'Arto friends'. Also, some of the users commented on the pictures I had put up even though I had not sought for comments like they do. Some boys sent me 'dirty messages', called for webcam sex or commented on my looks. I also received some of those rather offensive sexual comments that the female users of Arto get from time to time. In that context I must say that I found my gender to play a role in the ethnographical investigation and I agree with Lindlof and Shatzer that embodiment is a big part of an ethnography and one must content with ones body and looks being part of the investigation. Drawing on (Warren 1988) the authors point out the fact that also in computer mediated communication the bodies of woman ethnographers affect the way they are perceived in the field and the roles and motives that are attributed to them (Lindlof and Shatzer 1998). In most cases my role and motive was by the users of Arto perceived as the one of a researcher, but for some I was a future good online friend, a big sister, a possible girlfriend or flirt (some boys actually stated that they liked 'older women') or simply as an adult who would listen to them. That being said, it is my opinion that I have experienced as close as possible what is it like to

be a (female) Arto user – whilst being an objective researcher. In that way my 'research' activities merged with my 'participation' activities (Scollon and Scollon 2004).

The core users of the site were really open for participating in my investigation. I got a lot of guest book messages saying "Cool investigation", "What you are doing is interesting" and likewise. After a while I received at least one guest book message a day saying "Hi, how is your investigation going?", "Have you found out what we are using Arto for?" or "Was my answers to your questionnaire yesterday useful?". Thus, it seemed that the youngsters enjoyed being a subject of study instead of just a subject of headlines in the newspapers.⁴

ANALYSIS

In this part of the paper I will report some of my findings and show how Arto as a social networking site plays a central role in the life of Danish youngsters – both socially as part of maintaining their friendships and individually as part of their identity construction. The analysis is based on my understanding as an ethnographer of the most predominant actions carried out by the cores users of Arto.

Based on the analysis I will subsequently discuss the concept of identity and how identity construction can be seen in an online setting like a social networking site.

Keeping out fakers and being real

During my ethnography I observed several actions which led me to conclude that there is a really strong sincerity discourse among the core users of Arto. First and foremost, the fight against 'fakers' is enormous. The users put a lot of effort into keeping out and revealing fake profiles on the site. At the time of my investigation e.g. fake lesbian profiles often appeared on the site. Those profiles were obviously false and clearly not created by real 17 year old lesbian girls. For one thing, the profile owners called themselves 'dikes' and 'horny' and their profile pictures were dirty or porn like and downloaded from the Internet. Those profiles were easy to see through and the majority of the Arto users did not take them seriously. Still, the users spent a lot of time reprimanding and deriding those and other faker profiles. They did so by typing "FAKER" or "Get out of here, faker" in the faker's guest book:

⁴ This has to do with the fact that when I conducted my investigation the media persecution of Arto was almost at its highest and the youngster were used to hearing only negative comments on Arto from adults; that being their parents, teachers, social services employees, policemen and so on. But here, on the other hand, was an adult who asked them what they thought and would listen to their experiences instead of just scaremongering.



Figure 4: Messages in a faker's guest book on Arto, translation in brackets, (Larsen 2005).

Often the users not only cried out 'faker', but also stated *how* they knew that the profile was false, e.g. by finding the URL for the profile picture online, pointing out errors in name, age or spelling, and thereby proving the falseness of the profile. Some even created profiles or web pages (e.g. Fakelinien.dk) dedicated to revealing fakers on Arto and other social networking sites (an effort I have seen carried out by users of for example MySpace, Bebo and YouTube as well). By doing this, the users self-regulate the communication and the authority on the website, they maintain a certain order and protect each other against communicating with fakers on the site.

Also in my questionnaire and focus group data the dislike against fakers was apparent. There was a clear joint resistance against fakers among the users of Arto who have no problem reporting or blocking the false profiles. As a result fakers have a hard time surviving on the site.

Because of this joint battle against fakers there is a common understanding of what it means to be 'a real Arto user' which the majority of the users follow in order to be recognised as competent members of the site. For them sincerity is an important issue and many deliberately

strive to appear as real and sincere as possible. They do so by putting up many pictures of themselves in everyday situations (often taken in their bedroom or in front of the webcam), and, as my data also revealed, it seems to be an unspoken rule among the users that the profile picture should be of oneself instead of for instance a picture showing a celebrity or some other motive. In the questionnaire, when asked what profile picture they had, many users stated that they *'of course'* had a picture showing themselves. "I think that people should know who I am. I hate fakers", was one of the typical responses. Their answers indicated that they found the profile picture to be an important indicator of whether someone is sincere or not. Also, many users write detailed profile texts to show that they are *'real'*. In some cases they have their best friend design and write their profile text or they put in testimonials from friends, which helps raise the credibility of the profile. By following these implicit rules and by correcting the fakers, the *'real'* users construct their sincere identity and appear as competent members of the nexus of practice.

This predominant discourse on sincerity and being real should be seen in relation to the fact that Arto is such a big part of the youngsters' everyday life. They use the site to communicate with their friends and express their personality for which reason being fake or pretending to be someone else would be contradictory:

Interviewer: "Why do you have such a strong dislike against fakers on the site? Why don't you like them?"

Sabrina: "Then you can never be sure of who it is."

Martin: "They are like abusing the site."

Lisanne: "Because it is a place where you can express your personality, and you cannot do that if you are a faker."

Michael: "They don't really have a purpose in there. They are only using it to annoy others. To see how many who will write them. Then there is no reason for having a profile in there. I think it's stupid if they don't have anything to use it for."

[From focus group interview (Larsen 2005)]

Many of the ordinary users spend several hours a day logged onto the website (Larsen 2005) talking about non-virtual things such as boyfriends or girlfriends, school, parents etc. As the users point out themselves, a lot of what they write to each other is just boring or trivial (Larsen 2005). My own observations back up that statement as the most frequent messages I saw in the users' guest books were short affirmative messages like "Hi, what are you doing?"

or “Popped by”. Those messages have a phatic function⁵ and could be translated into: “Hi, I am still your friend and I care about you”. In those cases Arto functions as a continuation of the young people’s everyday life and network in which the fakers are disturbances who should be kept out.

Declaring love and seeking acknowledgement

Thus, the youngsters mostly use Arto to communicate with IRL-friends from their local environment. When they do so, the communication between them is often exceptionally affectionate and loving. Especially, a strong love discourse can be found in the profile texts. Here, the users, both boys and girls, often write about how much they love their best friend(s) and how certain persons mean the world to them. Sometimes they do not even write anything about themselves, but fill up their profile with praising comments about their friends:



(About MY Taz <3' .. Honey you are totally fantastic, you are my best friend, my one and only.. I love you with all of my heart. <33' You are always there when I need a comforting shoulder or just a good friend<3' You must know that I really appreciate you, MY girl.. Because that’s what you are, MY girl and that you will always be... You are someone special, someone one must NEVER take for granted.. You are probably one of the people I trust 100% and it is an honour to be your friend...)

Figure 5: Message to girlfriend in 16 year old girl’s profile text, first section translated in brackets (Larsen 2005).

This tendency can also be found in the blog posts, the guest books, the picture galleries, the mood function or even in the profile names; e.g. instead of having a ‘real’ name a girl integrates her best friend in her name and calls herself ‘LoveMyMichelle’. Interestingly, many of the functions the young people use to express their feelings towards their bests friends are

⁵ In Roman Jakobson’s terms the phatic language function deals with the features that establish or maintain the contact between the speakers and make sure they are in tune with each other (Drotner et. al. 1996).

not designed for that purpose. It is on the users' own initiative that they have started redefining the use of various functions on Arto to fit the need they have to exalt their friendships.

Many adults feel that this loving discourse is too exaggerated and hollow⁶ and one could, of course, find an influence in the young people's language from American TV shows like 'Beverly Hills 90210' or 'Friends', which are among Danish youngsters' favourite shows, and from which they could have adopted the loving tone. What is interesting is, however, why the young people feel the need to express themselves in this way on the website and what it means to them? Based on my analysis I would argue that the predominant discourse on love is not only connected to the way in which the users maintain their friendships, but also the way they construct their identity as young people.

When asked why they write in this manner, the young people have a hard time explaining their actions. They do, however, say that they like seeing those messages about themselves. "It is nice to see what others think of you. I am happy that someone writes about me in their profile. It shows our feelings", as a 15 year old girl said in my focus group interview (Larsen 2005). In that way, the youngsters are helping each other being valued and getting the acknowledgement they seek. They are using the website to get a feeling of self-confidence which is an important part of growing up and constructing your identity as a teenager. Through the cultivation of friendships and the close IRL-relations the users of Arto are 'practicing youth' and constantly being reminded that they are all right and someone likes them. Here, the website with its different features plays a crucial role. The youngsters do not talk like that when they meet face to face (Larsen 2005). With Arto they have found a space for expressing themselves authentically and being acknowledged. And there is a great profiling value in being mentioned in someone's profile text.

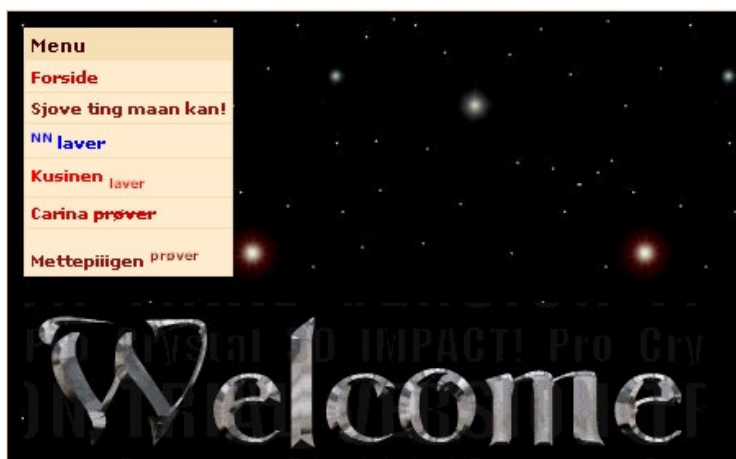
Co-constructing each other's identity

Thus, there is also an aspect to the love discourse which is related to the way the young people construct and perform their identity online. It is not by accident that the loving messages are displayed in the profile texts and not hidden in e.g. guest book messages, e-mails or sms-messages. Of course, the young people want the other users to know what their friends think of them. As a result of this, they deliberately use each other as co-constructors of

⁶ Especially, many parents express an incomprehensible attitude towards their children's online communication when I am out giving talks on Arto at parent meeting at schools. This resembles the way previous parental generations felt about their children talking for hours with friends on the phone.

identity online. This can be seen in several different actions carried out by the young people on the website.

During my seven months on Arto it became more and more common that the users had one or several of their best friends design and edit their profile and thereby allowing the friends to describe who they are, what their interests are and so on.⁷ In some cases, the users even split their profile text into sub-sites in order to have room for several of their best friends' descriptions, like this 14-year old boy:



(Menu
Front page
Funny things one can do
NN creates
The Cousin creates
Carina tries
Mette girl tries)

Figure 6: 14-year old boy's profile text designed and edited by four other users, menu translated in brackets (Larsen, 2005).

As a consequence of the predominant love discourse between IRL-friends the profile owners can be almost certain that the people they assign to edit their profile will write something positive. Similarly, some users chose to put messages from "the ones that matter" in their profile text. Here, they themselves pick out guest book messages to be displayed on the front page of their profile – some even demand messages from friends which they can put in. By doing this the users have the possibility to choose the messages which will reflect them in the most positive manner without being perceived as smug or self-centred. Thereby, the praising

⁷ In fact, this became so common that in December 2005 Arto created a feature that allowed users to assign others the rights to write in their profile description, without having to hand out their username and passwords (because this practice caused some misuse).

messages function as testimonials and seals of approval which the youngsters can use when portraying themselves on the webpage.

This is very similar to the way in which the picture gallery on Arto is being used. Getting comments in the gallery is very sought after, and the youngsters often urge each other to leave comments. They do so by writing in guest books, posting on the notice board or sending (rather expensive) messages to the front page. The users often succeed in getting many positive comments like "You are so pretty" or "You are hot". After having looked at dozens of comments in the picture galleries I found that the comments were very seldom negative – they were almost always praising whether they came from 'Arto friends' or not. There seems to be an unspoken rule to comment in a positive manner on Arto. This of course has a self-reinforcing effect (if I post positive about you, you post positive about me) and for this reason it is not so dangerous to eagerly ask for comments all over the website. One can be almost sure to get some good comments out of it (e.g. even the skinny boys were told that they had a nice 'six pack'). Urging for these comments is of course also connected to the fact that the youngsters seek recognition and acknowledgement, but via this function they use each other as co-constructors of identity. By using their network of trustworthy friends they brand themselves and make sure they are portrayed in a positive manner on the website.

When young people are constantly constructing themselves via single practices on Arto where they display themselves and invite their URL-friends to comment them while simultaneously letting their IRL-friends describe and define them via profile text and guest book messages, what does that mean to the way their identity should be seen? What characterizes the identity construction of young people on Arto?

DISCUSSING THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY ONLINE

In answering these questions we need to take a step back to what constitutes the notion of identity online. Generally speaking, a distinction is often made between identity as something rather stable (e.g. the psychodynamic view) and identity as role playing, fragmented and socially constructed (e.g. a Goffmanian or Gergenian view). Especially, a number of theories about young people's use of computers have argued that the Internet makes the identity of young people fragmented and that youngsters especially via chat can play with their identity, cheat with name, age and gender and thereby totally define who they want to be. This had led many to believe that the Internet results in a post modern identity construction where youngsters can put together different identities as a jigsaw puzzle (Drotner 2001, Turkle 1995). Of course we can see the role playing aspects of young people's identity construction on Arto (certainly, the fakers are a token for that). And it would be more than fair to talk about

socially constructed identities when referring to the way the young people are “practicing youth” on the social networking site. However, that does not mean that the identities of the young people are totally fragmental and erratic. Several studies (including mine) show that what young people do and talk about online is very close to their non-virtual lives and friends for which reason the boundary between online and offline is blurred (Hine 2000; Drotner 2001; Larsen 2005; boyd 2006).

Therefore, talking about identity construction on Arto as simply fragmented or characterised by role playing would be wrong. The users are very much ‘real’ and themselves, but at the same time they all expose very reflexive and relational identities. Their identities are continuously constructed through their network and in different situations – they basically exist and become real through their network and those specific situations. Based on my analysis, I therefore propose a distinction in the concept of identity between ‘identity-in-practice’ and ‘identity-across-timescales’ (Lemke 2003) which, as I will argue, are coexisting concepts on Arto, but appear in different situations.

The division between the two conceptions of identity originally comes from Lemke (2003). He writes about ‘identity-in-practice’ (or ‘identity-in-the-moment’, as he also calls it) as the aspects of our identity which we perform in different situations. Within this understanding identity could be seen as role playing and goes well together with the theory of Goffman. This form of identity construction appears on the short timescales of situated small-group activity (Lemke 2003). On Arto we see this part of the young people’s identities being performed e.g. when they are putting up pictures in the gallery and eagerly asking others to comment them, when they are creating small polls in their profiles asking “What am I?” or “What do you think of me?” often leaving only positive answer options such as “Nice, Sweet, Beautiful, Hot, Lovely” etc. Or it can be found in other single actions where they young people are trying to be recognized or seeking an imitate acknowledgement from peers. In all these single examples the users are somewhat roleplaying and trying to appear in a certain way in a certain situation – and we see a part of their “identity-in practice”.

On the other hand, Lemke puts up the concept of ‘identity-across-timescales’. This part of our identity is appropriate to larger institutional scales and lifespan development. It is not determined by a single identity performance in a single situation, but is constituted through several actions across time and different types of situations and is thereby connected to our habitus (Lemke 2003). I would argue that, on Arto, this part of the young people’s identity is connected to the love discourse and the way the see themselves based on, among other things, the way they are described as a “good friend” or “someone I can always depend on” by

their offline friends. Those descriptions and co-constructions of identity are helping the young people construct their 'identity-across-timescales' and helping them form who they want to be and how they see themselves as individual youngsters within the network.

The two notions of identity are inextricably linked with each other. We are not dealing with two different kinds of identity – just two different views upon the same concept and the one would not exist without the other. However, splitting the concept of identity into two can be analytically helpful – as we can get different glimpses into the identity of the young people according to what kind of actions we are looking at. Thus, in my analysis I have touched upon many different identity performances ('identity-in-practice') which are all linked to the individual, social and historical lives of the Arto users ('identity-across-timescales') which I am only able to recognize because of my long-term "zone-of-identification".

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Based on my analysis, I would argue that Arto has opened an alternative space for young people's friendship formation and identity construction.

As can be seen from the analysis the youngster's construction of identity on Arto is heavily relational and interwoven with their friendships. Their construction of identity across time often goes through their friends as the users actively use other's descriptions of them in their own profile pages or let others describe who they are. In that sense there is both an element of self-construction as well as a strong element of co-construction which the youngsters encourage themselves. Here they rely on a commonly shared understanding that they must speak highly positive of each other. In a way the users are actually in control of other's construction of them to the degree that they can be almost certain that it will be a positive one. Thus, the users are continuously constructing and co-constructing their identity online – not only by using the site and its functionalities, but also by using their friends as mediational means.

As I have illustrated, the youngsters also use Arto to maintain and confirm their IRL-friendships. They do so by constantly reminding each other that they are best friends, love each other, mean the world to each other and so on. Also, the recognition and constant acknowledgements are quite important to the young people; it is important for them to be constantly assured that they look good and others like them. This is part of their identity construction as young people and this is why the social networking site is so important. In that sense Arto functions as a forum for reassurance and affirmative messages between the youngsters.

As a consequence, the majority of the Arto users do not distinguish between online and offline and do not have another personality online. In order to be recognized and acknowledged by their friends they have to be themselves for which reason the hate fakers who disturb their purpose of being on the site. Instead of simply role playing, pretending to be someone else or trying out different identities it is much more interesting for the youngsters on Arto to be accepted as who they are. Therefore the website is a continuation of their offline life. It is exactly this combination of online and offline that makes Arto so popular. This can be seen in both the online communication, which is often about something going on offline, and in the heavy focus on maintaining the IRL-friendships. Therefore, I would argue that social networking sites like Arto are simply a continuation of young people's normal teenage life.

A final point I would like to make is the importance of in-depth field studies. As researchers we need to spend time on social networking sites in order to fully grasp what is going on there. Otherwise we might end up analysing youth online from an outsider's perspective which could be coloured by prejudices and pre-defined opinions (and we would only have access to single performances of identity-in-practice). Therefore, virtual ethnography and participant observations where you act as a researcher as well as a regular user is fruitful when understanding youngsters and online social networking.

REFERENCES

boyd, d. (2006). "Identity Production in a Networked Culture: Why Youth Heart MySpace." American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Drotner, K. (2001). Ungdom i en globaliseret verden. Individualitet, Værdier, Fællesskab. P. R. F. et.al., Dafolo Forlag.

Drotner, K. et. al. (1996): Medier og kultur. En grundbog i medieanalyse og medieteori, Borgen

Hine, C. (2000). Virtual Ethnography. London, SAGE Publications Ltd.

Larsen, M. C. (2005). Ungdom, venskab og identitet - en etnografisk undersøgelse af unges brug af hjemmesiden Arto (Youth, Friendship and Identity - an ethnographic study of young people's use of the social networking site Arto). Department of Communication. Aalborg, Aalborg University.

Larsen, M. C. (2006). Bag om Arto.dk - fra venskaber til mediepanik (Behind Arto.dk - from friendships to moral panic). Kommunikationsforum (www.kforum.dk).

Larsen, M. C. (2007). 35 Perspectives on Online Social Networking. Social Computing Magazine (www.socialcomputingmagazine.com).

Lemke, J. L. (2003). Identity, Development, and Desire: Critical Questions. To be published in Identity Trouble: Critical Discourse and Contestations of Identification. C. Caldas-Coulthard and R. Iedema, Macmillan/Palgrave.

Lindlof, T. R. and M. Shatzer, J (1998). "Media ethnography in virtual space: Strategies, limits, and possibilities." Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media.

Norris, S. and R. H. Jones, Eds. (2005). Discourse in Action. Introducing mediated discourse analysis, Routledge.

Scollon, R. (2001). Action and Text: towards an integrated understanding of the place of text in social (inter)action, mediated discourse analysis and the problem of social action. Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis. R. Wodak and M. Meyer, Sage Publications.

Scollon, R. (2001). Mediated discourse: the nexus of practice. London; New York, Routledge.

Scollon, R. and S. B. K. Scollon (2004). Nexus analysis: discourse and the emerging internet. London; New York, Routledge.

Turkle, S. (1995). Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet, Simon and Schuster.

Warren, C. A. B. (1988). Gender Issues in Field Research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of Practice - Learning, Meaning, and Identity. New York, Cambridge University Press.