The meaning of a story
Young people's agency and constructions of gender and sexuality in narratives
Online

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Abstract

This paper addresses agency and constructions of gender and sexuality in young people’s own written narratives online. The general purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of how agency relates to online conditions for communicating life situations. A more specific purpose is to explore how young people interact with technology to elaborate on gender constructions and sexuality. The analysis turns to illuminate young people’s different types of agency and gender subjeckivities in an online setting. 52 narratives on a website designed for young people (UMO.se) have been analysed. The result shows that the web site function is used to express emotions and positions related to specific life situations that can feel otherwise challenging to express for the target group. The way this web function is being used show a structure that young people use to reflect upon, argue for, defend and change gendered subjectification. This reveal internet as an arena where gender subjectivities, as a part of a reflection of the self, can be reflected and elaborated upon as a further extension to a current everyday situation.

Keywords: Agency, Gender, Internet, Online communication, Sexuality, Youth, Young people

Introduction

In contemporary society computer mediated communication (CMC) has become a way to express and interact. Researchers in the field of virtual communication argue that conditions for communication online offers possibilities for people to explore their identities and to express ideas that are not easily expressed in offline contexts (se for example Jones 1998, Hine 2000, Jaquemot 2002, Holloway & Valentine 2003, Livingstone 2005, Stern 2008, boyd 2008).

In this article I will discuss how these “changed” conditions can come into use in young people’s ways of communicating situations in ordinary life on a virtual arena. The specifically chosen subject for exploration is young people’s online narratives about situations that mark out sex and relationship as central themes. The general purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of how online conditions for communication becomes agentic. A more specific purpose is to explore how young people interact with technology to elaborate on gender
constructions and sexuality. An overall question for the article is: What kind of agency appears in the use of online narratives in relation to the self, gender and sexuality?

In online activity the individual is separated from physical markers and the levels of communication that involves an embodiment. The kind of anonymity that comes with the liberation from the physical body can be experienced as a feeling of safety that encourage an intimacy that is often held back in interaction offline (Sharf 1999, Mann & Stewart 2000). Virtual communication is also interactive in synchronous and asynchronous ways, as the participators can be senders as well as receivers, independent of each other in time and space. Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine (2003) have listed some aspects of online communication that makes it appealing to children and young people. They mean that these conditions make children and young people feel more competent in online environments. Online they feel liberated in their expressions because physical appearance or body reactions can be hidden (ibid). Further they have time to reflect upon what and how things should be expressed ‘ICT give them more control over their identities than spontaneous face-to-face encounters’ (ibid:134). Finally they can create a sphere of intimacy where the things that are being expressed will not reach the local peer group and be a cause for slander. Susannah Stern (2008) means that the possibility to present oneself, in form of an identity or a self-image, that cannot be presented elsewhere, is embedded in online activity. This line of expression also has impact on young people’s ways of handling feelings and thoughts that they go through in offline settings. Feelings of stress, grief, anger or betrayal can be expressed and reflected upon (ibid). Stern suggests that self-reflection is “the most commonly cited reward of maintaining a personal site among youth authors’ (Stern, 2008:102). In matters that are hard to handle this is named “getting it all out” or “therapeutic” by the informants in Sterne’s study. Further Stern exemplify young bloggers experience of blogging as a way of “being myself”.

Previous research in this field shows that the conditions for communicating can be experienced by youth as more “freeing” than in offline settings. What this could mean more specifically is a question that is crucial for this article. What kind of agency can be discovered in young people’s communication about their life situations in narratives online?

**Theoretical and methodological points of departure**

My understanding of young people’s communication on this arena is based on a theoretical perspective held by researchers in the area new social studies of childhood. Children’s worlds, as they themselves see it, are focused. Children and youth are not seen as a biological category more like a social constructed identity depending on time and context (Holloway & Valentine 2000). Within this perspective young people are seen as social actors in their own rights (James & Prout 1997). What being a social actor in its own rights means can be ambiguous in relation to children and young people. Nick Lee (1998) questions the sociological idea about agency a property within the individual. Lee put forward the question if agency can be seen as essential. He emphasize that the agentic independence that sociological theory rest upon is in fact a pattern of dependency between a “network of materials, texts, bodies and persons” (ibid 1998:459). This means that the actor creates agency
in collaborations with other subjects/objects and that there is no such thing as independency or essentialism, in this process. To see young people’s agency as related to the network they act within instead of an essential skill is fruitful for the understanding of online agency. Doing this opens up for a perspective where young people and technology interact with each other in the creation of agency. In the study of young people’s agency online this means that the current virtual arena should be taken into consideration as an active part that agentic independence, expressed by young people online, depend upon.

The previous discussion illuminate the importance of studying young people’s online activity as agency created in-between the subject and the object. This gives an alternative perspective for understanding different kind of agentic actions that is within reach for young people today. The reason to choose sex and relations as a specific field for the study is connected to the tension held between sexuality and discourses of childhood and youth (Löfberg 2008). Berry Mayall (2002) means that young people relate to institutionalized norms about childhood and youth as a structure simultaneously as they act on agency as young people in their current time. In institutionalized discourses about childhood and youth young people are often seen as a group that need to be excluded from areas in the adult world that they are not seemed to, developmentally, handle (Buckingham 2000). These areas are violence, sexuality, economy and politics, areas which young people today gain knowledge about through media (ibid). Concern arises in the adult society when young people spend time interacting, or gathering information, about for example sexuality (Tincknell et al 2003). In young people’s current, networked, agency sexual activity with a partner can be seen as an option to create meaning, a possibility to develop towards adulthood and to deepen their constructions of gender (Löfberg 2008). Here we have a clash between institutionalized norms about childhood and youth and a media society where technology gives access to information and activities independent of age. Young people that direct their interest towards relationships that includes sexuality turns to adult society and exists in a borderland between institutionalised discourses and their agency in current time. Due to this clash sex and relations are interesting subjects for young people’s agency online. The online activity can be understood as bridging the gap between what is institutionalized and what is current culture in young people’s lives.

To identify discourses and multiple subjectivities that are acted out in the online narratives the analysis is inspired by positioning theories as it is used in social psychology. Positions are possible to take within the frame of a discursive practice. It is, so to say, the discursive practice that is the framework for the individual possibilities to position oneself (Harré & Langenhove 1999). A discourse is a way of thinking, acting and speaking and it’s through this a discourse is given its contextualization (Säljö 2001). In the use of discourses we are given the opportunity to place certain artefacts and acts in a specific coherence. It’s through the discourses we are acquainted with what we create in our social practices; it is the discourse (or discourses) we identify as predominant(s) that gives us our linguistic understanding of reality. Within this reality we express ourselves with language and acts in a dynamic course of events (Säljö 2001). In this way an understanding for current discourses and the positions that are being used within them gives a further direction for additional analyses of cultural expressions. Carbaugh (1999) means that the discursive construction has an historical ground;
it is also influenced by the cultural context, negotiable within social practice and individually used. In analysis of possible positions in a discourse the concept subject are used to acknowledge that it is the variations of the self, not the personal identity that is under study (Davies & Harré 1999). The discourses in narratives about relationships and sexuality online give an image of society ideals and the cultural context in action. In the analysis special attention has been given to gender subjects in relation to the current discourse that is being used as a frame for the narrative. That is, what kind of position is possible within the current situation that is being (re)constructed in the story?

To connect subject positions even more to an understanding of how gender is constructed a post structural feminist perspective is used. By doing so the purpose is to illuminate different performativities in the stories and their relation to femininity and masculinity. Judith Butler (1990) discusses how we live in a binary structure where two different sexes are accepted. These should be each other’s opposite poles and attract one another. This also lead to the normative position of heterosexuality. Butler means that femininity and masculinity is something that continuously is acted put in everyday life situations. These repeated acts, called performativity where both sex and gender are constructed, creates notions about a natural or stable sex. It is the culturally influenced acts that conclude in the illusion of two stable sexes. The heterosexual matrix is a model of gender clarity that Butler uses to explain how gender is performativity. The matrix frames construction of culturally comprehensible bodies that has to emanate from stable sexes. By stating that sex and gender are cultural subjectivities Butlers theories gives an opening to understand, interpret and act out gender in various ways beyond the idea of the binary sex/gender structure. The “doing away with’ binary structures is central for poststructural feminism in general which move towards a deconstruction of oppositions (Alaimo & Hekman 2008). The annulment of dualism also is considered as crucial by Alan Prout (2008). He means that new social studies of childhood would benefit of breaking through, above all, the nature-culture binary that often has been used as a concept to understand the worlds of children and youth. The theoretical perspective has gone from understanding children and youth as natural to understanding them as entirely cultural in the social constructionism perspective. Instead we need to acknowledge “childhood as assemblages of heterogonous materials’ (ibid:34). Prout state further:

In order to understand this it is important to move away from the idea of a determinant process in which one entity, natural, social or technological drives this process. Whilst the properties of nature and culture are not infinitely malleable, they are overdetermined, in the sense that they are complex, emergent and open to contingency. In fact the entities that we call ‘biological’, ‘technological’ and ‘social’ are already networked together (Prout 2008:34)

Prout’s argument rest on postmodern feminism and it’s resistance against gendered dichotomies such as nature/culture. In this theoretical perspective we leave the understanding of the subject as a superior actor in its environment and focus on assemblages where both subject and objects are performative agents. As Catharina Landström puts it when it comes to technology: ‘Assemblage refuges subjectivity as constituted in complex relationships with technology, placing the relationship as the crucial mechanism, not identity’
(Landström2007:17). Through this perspective the importance of the object (in this case the online venue) for the possible ways of agency becomes is illuminated.

The interest in this article is to gain a deeper understanding of how online conditions for communication are used by the young people and to explore how young people interact with technology to elaborate on gender constructions and sexuality. The theoretical framework is social constructionism, in terms of new social studies of childhood, discourse theory, positioning theory, and a poststructural feminist perspective. The narratives are analysed with consideration to the theoretical concepts discussed above. Through identifying constantly recurring positions/statements/notions and variations of these a deeper understanding of relevant aspects concerning agency and multiple gender subjectivities appears. A first step was looking for themes in every single narrative, trying to get an understanding of the main points of every single story. Further, starting to compare themes and look for similarities in the material. The analysis then went on to identifying discourses that the stories mainly were built upon and the different subject positions that appeared in the narratives.

**The field**

The data gathered in this study is one part of an ongoing research project called *Creating Space: A study of young people’s use of Internet forums for articulating their life situations* (April 2009-April 2012), financed by the Swedish Knowledge Foundation. The narratives analysed in this article are collected on the web site UMO.se

*UMO is a national web-based youth friendly clinic for young people aged 13 to 25 years. The purpose of the site is to make it easier for young people to find relevant, current and quality assured information about sex, health and relationships.*

*UMO is dedicated to increase and enhance empowerment and equality in young people’s lives. UMO aims to provide information and possibilities of reflection through which young people can influence their own lives – at home, in relationships, in school or at work.*

This is the goal of the site as it is announced online. UMO is a site developed in Sweden by Sjukvårdsrådgivningen SVR AB (Health and medical care counseling guide center). It has been financed by the Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality and the operation of the site is financed by the county councils and municipalities. It is a multi site which includes information through text, pictures and films. Further young people can anonymously ask personal questions that are answered by professionals like midwives, psychologists, physicians and dieticians. They also have a venue for “own narratives’ where young people can send in their own stories for publication on the site. The stories are varied in topics but most of them are stories that concern difficulties or highlights that the storyteller faces in his/hers life situation. The narratives are read by the editorial staff of the site before it’s published. Most narratives are published but there are stories that are rejected by the editorial staff. UMO.se opened up as a website in November 2008. When the data collection was
taken place (May 2009) 82 stories had been published on the site. 52 of those were narratives about relationships or sexuality from four different categories, *Sex and rape assaults, Love, Sex* and *Sexual disposition*. The categorization is made by the editorial staff not by the authors to the stories. These 52 stories are the empirical material used in this study. In the table below the spread of the narratives in relation to gender and sexual identity is shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sex and rape assaults</th>
<th>Love</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Sexual disposition</th>
<th>Total stories in every sexual identity category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expressed heterosexual identity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed homo- or bisexual identity</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified sexual identity</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors in total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total stories in every category</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3: Empirical material*

The site offers publication in anonymity. Mostly the young authors use this offer and sign their stories with a nickname or simply *anonymous*. Therefore the categories stated above are those which can be read out from the stories. Only 18 of the 52 authors reveal their age in the story. This is the reason why age as a category is not included in the table. Of those who reveal their age the youngest is 13 years old and the oldest is 19 years old. Average age of those who states their age is 16.4 years. The fact that this is a site for people between 13-25 years of age combined with school as an aspect that is mentioned in many stories can be understood as markers signifying that the narratives are authored by young people.

Sexuality as an identity is stated in the table. The divide between different sexual identities is made on assumptions. Only 2 young authors clearly stated their sexual identities as
homosexuals in the narratives. Most of the writers that announced an attraction to the same sex did this without being really sure of if they were homo- or bisexual. Because of this homo- bisexuality is presented as one category. Authors which stories concerns relationships, love affairs, or sexual encounters with someone from the opposite sex have been categorized as heterosexuals.

30 of the 39 stories by girls and 6 of the 11 stories by boys have a heterosexual overall discourse contextualizing their stories (here the stories told by female authors about sexual assaults from males are included, even if the female author doesn’t state her sexual identity). Within this discourse subject positions reproduce the heterosexual matrix of desire telling the story of two oppositional gender positions (female, male) attracting each other. These narratives take different turns. Some of them describe encounters that don’t fall out the way the author expected. Other narratives tell the story about loving relationships. Some of the stories use a homo- or bisexual discourse in contextualizing the story. There are stories about life situations where the author finds her-/himself in exploring a sexual identity outside heteronormativity. Here, the heterosexual discourse is not the dominating discourse to frame the story. Even so, heterosexuality remains a part of the structure in the narratives as something that the author “have turned away from”. Because of this stories of homo- or bisexuality can be seen as stories of resistance.

The material is diverse and the stories vary. What is described in the narratives can be understood as a fluid move between passivity/activity in relation to positions of gendered subjectivity. The agency in the stories are closely related to what opinion the author has of how activity/passivity are integrated in the gendered subject positions that are described. In the first section of the results: The heterosexual discourse and activity/passivity as performativity in gendered subject positions, activity/passivity as markers for how performativity about gender is manifested is discussed. The second section: Self-reflection as a part of the gender construction in the heterosexual discourse, discusses how the venue is used by the young authors for reflecting upon themselves in questioning the norms of how to act out femininity/masculinity in the heterosexual discourse. The final section: Taking a stand against the heterosexual discourse, deals with young people’s ways of using the venue to express a resistance against gendered subjectivities within the heterosexual matrix of desire.

The heterosexual discourse and activity/passivity as performativity in gendered subject positions

Some stories, told by female authors, reproduce traditional positions of gendered subjects where the female position binds femininity to passivity and the masculine position binds masculinity to activity. This, for example, include the girl who relates to the wishes of a boy constructing femininity in a heteronormative discourse where individual rights and thoughts of possibility for agency are subordinated to someone else (in these narratives) the boys/mans outspoken needs and wishes. These stories discuss everything from a love situation that didn’t turn out as the storyteller wished to stories about accomplished rapes. In the example below
the young author describes a situation where the feminine subject position is depending on masculine approval¹.

He told me he liked me very much and I’m very sensitive to that, so I had a crush on him. Then he wanted to meet so he came over to my house. We were at my room watching a movie and suddenly he started to caress the inside of my thigh. And then he took my tights of and my panties and pulled down his trousers and then we had sex. I was a virgin at the time and because I have a hard time rejecting guys I didn’t say anything. Even though I didn’t really wanted to have sex. After that I thought we were going together. Later on when I called him he didn’t answer and he didn’t respond to my sms. Sometime later I found out that he had a girlfriend… That hearted a lot. Sometimes I can’t even be on my room and lay on my bed because I’m thinking of what happened. I can’t even sleep sometimes. But I’m trying to fight it, everybody should.

In this narrative different feminine subject positions are taken. First, feminine subjectivity is subordinated to the masculine subjectivity. The performativities described are related to heteronormativity where the feminine position is in need of masculine approval to be able to manifest as a subject. The narrative reproduces traditional subjectivities in the heteronormative discourse where objectification of the feminine subject and hierarchical positions in the heteronorm stand out as markers. The masculine position can be rendered as active (with sexual activity and sexual initiatives as natural). The feminine position can, at first sight, be understood as entirely passive. There is though an aspect of activity. To position oneself as an object is a way to attract men and through this gain power and status to the position by being “high scored” by men that is on the top positions in this discourse. Secondly, the narrative takes another turn and another feminine position is taken. To eliminate the objectification in the former position the discursive context is changed by the author. By stating a relationship as the prior goal in this narrative she positions herself as someone who has been fooled. The feminine subjectivity turns to a position in a discourse where the masculine position should agree to bonding. When this is not done the masculine subjectivity can be rendered as ruthless.

The young female author is telling a story with multiple subjetification. While doing this she is reconstructing traditional subject positions, both feminine and masculine. The venue becomes a space where she can express her feelings about the situation in the same time as she elaborates with different positions. Re-establishing female subjectivity as a position subordinated to the masculine position simultaneously as she draws on this subordination to create a feminine position of power through objectifying the boy.

Activity as a masculine gendered position is also shown in narratives told by males on the venue. In the excerpt below a male author describes masculine subjectivity position in the heterosexual matrix.

¹ All empirical data have been translated from Swedish to English. The Swedish versions have not been attached to protect the authors from identifying their narratives in the online setting. The examples showed in the article are excerpts from different narratives. No narrative is shown in its whole.
I guess I was interested in both of them at the beginning, but due to circumstances that I will get into later I chose one before the other. We became friends rapidly and socialized a lot under a period. We cocked together, partied and had fun. I became more and more interested in her, but she told me that she was very much in love with a guy she knew from high school, that also moved here with her. He was on the other hand not shore of his feelings for her. The whole thing ended up with sex between me and her a couple of times. I’d call it accidents but because it happened more than ones and because I was in love with her I don’t think that’s fair. She told the guy she was in love with what had happened and after many tears it all ended up with them going back together. Not so funny for me but I was happy for her, she was really unhappy without him. I went through some weeks of suffering, but came over her at the end. Then the interest for the other girl aroused again.

Activity is crucial in this story. The author is using the venue to reproduce a traditional masculine position. He is also deconstructing the hierarchy of heteronormativity by constructing gendered positions as equal in terms of power.

The masculine subjectivity, as it is positioned here, is acting out an agency that is mastering the situation even though the outcome isn’t the one he wished for. Compared to the earlier story where gendered subjectivities were structured within a hierarchical heteronormativity this narrative doesn’t outline a hierarchy between feminine and masculine subject positions. Instead the performativities are described as emotionally guided irrespective if the gendered subjectivity is feminine or masculine. The story is not folding around a sexual act; instead the sexual act is one of the ingredients in the story. One of the reasons for this more equal description of gendered subjectivities can be embedded in the agency of activity in the masculine position. There is no clearly marked subordination in the masculine position, which renders the masculine subjectivity as a position that doesn’t have to create resistance against other subjectivities. The venue online becomes a space where the young author can reconstruct masculine subjectivity as active and in control of the situation.

**Self-reflection as a part of the gender construction in the heterosexual discourse**

To understand these stories also beyond the opposition passivity/activity we now turn our focus to how they are telling the story. The example below from a story told by a girl exemplifies this.

A bit later me and my friends went out to the other room to sit down. My friends take seats but there is no available seat for me. On one of the chairs sits the guy that earlier tried to pick me up. He says that I can sit on his lap and my friends tell me I should. I sit down on his lap and I feel a bit uncomfortable because he’s starting to caress me. Later on he and I start to make out with each other, and I’m not completely sober so I think
that it won’t be a problem, sort of. He asks me if we shall go outside, and I follow, a bit reluctant. When we get outside I feel that I’m rather drunk and he continues to touch my body. I don’t dare to say no, but it wasn’t like I felt that I really didn’t want to either. He asks if I want to have sex and he says it in a way so I don’t really dare to say no. We walk away from the others and I just say yes to everything he says or ask. I don’t dare to say anything else. I don’t think it’s awful at first, but after a while I start to regret myself, but even so I let him get what he wants.

This excerpt exemplifies how narratives are used to tell two parallel stories. In the same time as the author tells the story she is constructing her gender position by reflecting upon her experienced possibility for agency. She is outlining a specific situation and illuminate emotional confusion over the situation. This can be understood as the possibility to, in a public forum, reflect upon what actually happened and to reflect upon the gendered position that was chosen in the current situation. The story positions the heterosexual female subject as someone who’s not in command of the situation because male wishes are superior. In the same time the venue offers a space where this situation - the possibility for agency as it were understood during action, and the gendered subject position as it was in performativity- can be further discussed. By telling this story the girl challenges the traditional dualism passivity/activity in its relation to femininity/masculinity and puts this dualism into process. Here the subject is folding into the conditions for her online activities and other dispositions of mind and feelings are expressed. By acting out from the invisibility that is offered in online communication, an agency that distance her from the gaze of “the other”, a visibility of the self can come forward and another way of appearing is possible. A process that presumably arise thoughts about how to find other possible gendered positions, both for the author and for the readers.

But not all female authors position themselves as passive in relation to the boy/man in the story. An active female subject position is also present in some stories.

Without knowing exactly what I did I rose on tiptoe and gave him a kiss right on the mouth. I have never, sooner or later, taken the initiative so I myself was really surprised. Everything ended up with us in each other’s arms before I panicked and ran off.

Another story that also illuminate this phenomenon is:

Because I had feelings for him I gave him a chance. We started to talk a lot on the phone. He sent me plenty of pictures of himself. I got to talk to his best friend and everything so then he couldn’t be a fake. When we decided to meet the first time I brought two friends. I wasn’t thinking of seeing him on my own. I was so nervous. He came with his father, he was very shy but that’s just sweet. The first kiss came that night. Wow.
In these two excerpts, the girls take initiatives and position themselves as active in carrying the situation forward. On the online venue a narrative about how these actions were taken and how they felt about it is outlined. Once again the possibility for agency online makes room for a way to reflect upon gender. By telling their stories in the interspace between passivity and activity they process gender as they see it. Both these girls acts in the situation but in the same time their acts are followed by an explanation. In the first example the girl emphasize that this is not her regular behavior, in fact she never have done this before or after. In the second excerpt meeting someone on the net and then making it physical are actions that are given very much consideration and the precautions are also clearly stated in the narrative. In the examples above the young female authors are challenging a feminine position, that of passivity. In the orientation to this explanations and arguments for their active positions arise. In the same time they spell out their acts and render them as important actions in the storyline. The multiple subjectivities, in this case a passive or active feminine position, can be spoken of as a double awareness about the “careful” feminine position and the need to reach for another position through acts of activity. It can also be understood as a deconstruction of gender by using multiple subjectivities. The venue fit this purpose because it’s a public forum where the activity in the situation can be showed together with arguments that justify feminine activity. This way of reflecting on different subjectivities comes forward and appear to legitimate an extended possibility for agency where gender (in this case feminine positions) can be elaborated.

Female storytellers also tell stories in accordance with the heterosexual matrix of desire. They outline a story where love and compassion leads to fulfillment Also these stories can be understood as reflecting upon feminine positions but from another angle. For example:

*That evening he came to me while I lay reading in my bed. If I ran to the chair it seemed to obvious that I didn’t dare to lie beside him so I stayed. We lay a long time just talking, I closed my eyes, both because I didn’t dare to look him in the eyes and reveal myself, and also because it was hard to look at anyone for so long. Suddenly he asked “What will you do if I do something?” I looked on him and asked “what?” Then he lay quiet for a while and I kept my eyes closed until I felt his lips. My whole body went warm but I didn’t respond. He asked why and I said that I didn’t know, he asked what I would do if he did it again and I didn’t answer. Then he kissed me again and I let go of everything, the best feeling in the whole world….. We’ve been together for ten months and I can honestly say that I love him..... He is incredibly nice and he won’t get upset if I mark on something he did, he improves, exactly as I try to do.*

In this story the author describes herself as someone who is afraid of showing her feelings for the one she fancies. This could be understood as a position taken in a feminine discourse were the oppositions passivity/activity strongly relate to performativity as a women or a man. If we go one step further the possibility for agency experienced on the venue creates a mind and a emotionality that can expand in contrast to when the situation was at hand. Here the description of bodily sensations as arousement, anxiety and joy are offsprings of the context
within which the narrative is told. Femininity once again is constructed, this time in line with traditional subject positions within the heterosexual matrix of desire.

Within the heterosexual discourse there are also stories problematizing the discourse about hegemonic masculinity in relation to a more emotional related discourse about malehood. In the excerpt below masculinity is positioned in a more emotional and ambivalent malehood. The narrative outline a confusion between the norms of a man in action taking the first step in approaching a girl and his individual fear of approaching.

_I laid there balancing between two impossible alternatives. I could either interpret what had just happened as an initiative and put my hand within her panties. It may end up with sex, but if I interpreted her wrongly she would shorlie start to hate me. Or I could turn around and chicken out and show that I didn’t have nor the courage nor the ability to take action as a guy should have._

The situation described above illuminates another way of constructing gender that shows in this online setting. The masculine subject position taken in this story shows an awareness of the normative masculine position within the heterosexual discourse. In the same time there is a parallel story reflecting upon activity as an already given subject position within the possibility for agency. The protagonist in this story position himself like someone who has to balance between a wish for a passive position and the experienced expectancy of activity in the masculine position. The online setting becomes a space where the subject position of masculine activity can be challenged, and therefore, reflected upon by expressing emotional experience related to the told situation. This differs from the hegemonic masculine position and gives another possibility for agency in the performativity of masculinity.

**Taking a stand against the heterosexual discourse**

On the venue there is also a resistance against the gendered subjectivities within the heterosexual matrix of desire. The venue in these cases works as a space where alternative positions can be spelled out to reflect upon.

_I stopped having sex and dating guys a year ago and it has really helped me. Above all I’ve realized that I don’t need a boyfriend to be all right and to have a good life. It’s so taken for granted that you should share your sex life with at least one guy, that you should be hunting for love and feel like a failure if you are single. Everything is about being good looking, partying and meet boys so you’re not left without you’re “better half”. And when girls in my age meet up with a boyfriend they allow almost any treatment instead of treating the relationships as any friendly relation where you expect respect and mutuality. I however don’t need a “better half” because I’m already whole and good._
The female author to this narrative takes a stand against what she experiences as the normalized female subjectivity in the heterosexual discourse. Doing this she uses the venue to react against a female passive subject position in a public forum. Using performativity to position an active female subject in the heterosexual discourse challenges traditional positions of subordination, to a certain degree.

Not all stories use a heterosexual discourse to frame their stories. Some stories move beyond heterosexuality in an exploration of other sexual identities.

A girl in my class, tall, curvy, sooo incredible beautiful. Her eyes are really something to lose yourself in. Every time when I walk by her side I’m happy. My body just wants to hug her. She’s almost like a magnet, everyone is drawn to her. But in a friendly way, or anyway the great majority. I would rather not show that I have strong feelings for her. I’m sort of afraid that anyone should find out my secret. She herself thinks it’s wrong to be bi/homosexual. Or she can’t imagine making out with a girl. Neither can I if I consider it, but how come then that I have so strong feelings for her? One just gets confused by being a teenager....

The narrative can be understood as a confession, a secret is being told. In young people’s local environment heterosexuality is a norm from which a majority construct they gendered subjectivities (Renold 2005). The venue offers a space where inner thoughts can be expressed publicly without interference from the local environment. Another subjectivity than the one’s in, for example school, can be visualized. When young people get access to public arenas beyond their local environment ways of creating performativity can also expand. Leading to a feeling of a more “true self”. On the venue this girl contributes to performativities of multiple subjectivities which blurs the limits for what is considered as a norm for female subjectivity.

When the homosexual subject (girl or boy) is the protagonist in the story heterosexuality also has a part to play. Here the subject finds pleasure in its “own ways of sexuality”, taking a stand against heterosexuality and construct the gendered subject in a discourse where own rights and needs are superior and render the actors in the story as equal. Young authors using a homo- or bisexual discourse express a possibility to act freely within a relationship feel trapped by the society norms about heterosexuality as the “right way to be”, as we can see in the examples bellow.

The summer flirt ended and I started high school. Fell badly in love with a friend I knew was bisexexual. We were flirting but she was unsure of what she wanted. After a break and a long discussion about how it wasn’t that smart and so on we came together again at the end of the summer when I’ve just started in the second grade. This time it’s she who is unsure and I who is more go-ahead, but it works, we keep our love secret, I don’t like it since I’m open to almost everybody in my close surroundings. But I respect her since I once were in her situation.
Concluding this I want to say that high school is the best that happened to me. Now finally I can be who I am after years of anxiety on the senior level I at last know who I am.

Another example;

One late night in November I told my mum and dad about my sexual disposition, I also told them that I met a boyfriend. They took it well but were of course a bit frightened; this is something completely new for them. Only a few days later I got my ticket to Stockholm. In connection to this I did something I’d never dared to do under ordinary circumstances, I lied to my parents about where I was going. I told them that I should meet a girl friend of mine in the city and spend the night at her place, but as a matter of fact I jumped on a train to Stockholm. I had a wonderful weekend in the capital; I’m more than in love, I’m madly in love and my parents didn’t know anything.

In the narratives about a homo- or bisexual dispositions the young authors describe how they in an active way acts to get in contact with potential partners independent of the gendered subject position. Telling stories about homo- bisexualities in this way could be understood as a possibility to take a position where the gendered subject isn’t framed by predisposed presumptions of a certain way to use the possibility for agency. Instead what comes clear in these narratives it is that the chosen position is divergent in relation to the dominant discourse of heterosexuality. The stories are constructing gender on another level, that of discourses. It is not the possibility for agency in relation to a feminine or a masculine subject position. It is the subject position in a bi/homosexual discourse that is crucial in these stories. Here the venue and the possibility for agency young people interpret from it offers a space for a “new” sexual identity, constructing a position against the dominant discourse of heterosexuality.

Summary and discussion

In this article narratives about relationships and sexuality by young authors published in an online setting has been the focus for a discussion about young people’s agency online. The specific interest has been to target performativity in gender constructions in this setting. To get a deeper understanding of how different elements work together in constructing gender different aspects have been taken into consideration. The subordination of young people in relation to adults as an overall discourse in relation the acts of children and youth in society. The conditions for online activity have been outlined as different compared to offline activity in terms of a change in the visualization of the self. Due to disembodiment and time/space as separated from the local environment the possibility to go beyond personal norms and values that is acted out in offline settings has been argued for. Online communication is seen as an element which reinforces a distance to “the other” and makes way for manifesting thoughts and feelings that isn’t expressed by the subject in other settings. Virtual culture is manifested through the venue “own narratives” where specific structures for the stories are mutually
produced by the users. The heterosexual discourse shows as a frame for the narratives which gives possibilities to certain subject positions.

**Self-reflection, a part of acting out different performativities**

The narratives that have been focused in this discussion can be understood as images. These images are not a priori seen as a way of creating identity. It’s seen as a way of self-reflecting and exploring the possibility for agency. This may lead to an identity construction or it may not. That is not what’s crucial. The point is the possibility for communicating whatever comes to mind which lead to a confrontation with own thoughts and opinions. As both Stern (2008) and boyd (2008) discusses in their work this confrontation becomes crucial because it’s meant for a presumed reader. In visualizing oneself before the eyes of a presumed reader the reader’s perspective is also taken into consideration by the young author (Stern 2008). The double awareness where a “fixed” gendered or sexual identity position are dealt with in the same time as alternative actions are being argued for illuminate an arena for self-reflection. The narratives on the venue often center descriptions of emotional conditions that occur in relation to the situation that is described. Often the storyteller outline a situation filled with ambivalent feelings. Mostly these are feelings that are expressed as not outspoken or reflected upon when the situation occurred. Subject positions are based on not who you are but what you feel. These conditions acknowledge a new line of expressions, especially on the basis of what is thought of as needs to express feelings. What comes to mind but are not outspoken due to social norms and expectations in the offline situation can be reflected upon online. In online settings interaction with others filters through a technology that enables the subject to speak with a voice that reach other subjects without giving them the power of reading bodily reactions or judging physical markers. This can lead to a freeing from the responsibility of controlling the social act. The subject doesn’t adapt to individual ideas of what can be socially expected of him/her in the same ways.

Due to the conditions in online settings, where bodily markers can be blurred, a certain degree of invisibility is created. Through this invisibility new performativities regarding social expressions and further social acts are being accessible. This can be understood as an authentic “me’, a visibility that cannot be acted out in offline settings. Shortly this can be described as follows:
The elaboration with different options for action is central for the narratives on this arena. It becomes central because of the paradox invisibility/visibility that can be acted out on the arena. This opens up for a reflection on the self that is seldom available for young people in other public settings. Agency online depends on conditions for virtual communication. As Prout (2008) means, the process is not driven out of one entity. It is a networked process where different entities work together. Or as Lee (1998) puts it, agentic independence relies on dependence of other subjects/objects. The agency young people can act out online depends on the media. This means that young people’s online activity will supply them with an extended reality - that is not possible in other settings where the virtual isn’t a part of the network - where other aspects of self and culture can be expressed and outlived. These conditions can contribute to an increased possibility to express oneself outside the norms for agency that is individually experienced in offline settings. Virtual environment becomes an increasing space for expressing what is “held back” in offline situations. Seen this way online activity/authorship, as a part of young people’s daily life, offers alternative ways of presenting ordinary life situations. What this means for young people’s day-to-day living needs to be explored further.

**Performativity in the heterosexual discourse**

In the narratives the discourse of heterosexuality plays a role. Within this discourse the gendered subjects position themselves in different positions of passivity and activity. These positions are not stable. The agency created through the venue opens up for a possibility to process what can be understood as “taking for granted” subject positions. On the venue the authors can position themselves in a fixed position of passivity or activity in the reconstruction of the situation but, through the possibility for agency on the venue this
position can be further elaborated. On the venue there is a cultural space where the authors can express “hidden” feelings and thoughts in relation to the gendered subject position that was taken in the original situation. This means that the position taken can be defended, argued for or reflected upon. By doing this gender and sexuality are processed like “a moving target”. Gendered subject positions loosen their stability and become diffracted. Situations where norms and ideas of performativity, as an action that exclude embodied personal feelings, can here change and be further reflected upon.

Here there is a possibility to, in a public forum, show the complexity of the ways one position oneself. Due to this the stories express a critique against the dominating heteronorms active in the heterosexual discourse and the subject positions within these discourses. This comes clear, I would say, in the understanding of young people’s ways to use their agency on the arena. Young people today are included in assemblages with media that reframe their actions. Acknowledging this illuminates a possibility for agency where the construction of gender and sexuality can be further elaborated through self-reflectional parts in the narratives.

Concluding remarks

The possibility of agency increases when we move from agency offline to agency online in our understanding of young people’s actions online. The stories come together as a link between ideas about norms that exist in society and multiple subjectivities challenging these norms. As a part of this the space for self reflection increases and the young authors take part in visualizing their subjectivities by telling their stories on the venue. Gender and sexuality goes beyond a construction and becomes a process “moving in action”.

Looking at the self–reflectional aspects and the subject positions that is included in the performativities gives us a new perspective. A perspective that reaches out from the intentional individual to assemblages where subjects and objects, as an online venue, come together to process the understanding of the world. This is a new social landscape that can give us other types of information about young people, media and the social processes that are challenged there.

References


