Online Identity Crisis Identity Issues in Online Communities

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Abstract

How have online communities affected the ways their users construct, view, and define their identity? In this paper, we will approach this issue by considering two philosophical sets of problems related to personal identity: the “Characterization Question” and the “Self-Other Relations Question.” Since these queries have traditionally brought out different problems around the concept of identity, here we aim at rethinking them in the framework of online communities. To do so, we will adopt an externalist and cognitive point of view on online communities, describing them as virtual cognitive niches. We will evaluate and agree with the Attachment Theory of Identity, arguing that there is continuity between offline and online identity and that usually the latter contributes to the alteration of the former. Finally, we will discuss ways users can enact self-reflection on online frameworks, considering the impact of the Filter Bubble and the condition of Bad Faith.

Keywords Identity · Online Communities · Virtual Cognitive Niches · Filter Bubble · Double Mutual Anticipation · Bad Faith · Affordance

1 Introduction: Our Cognitive Framework and Goals

How have online communities affected the ways their users construct, view, and define their identity? This question arises from two intuitive assumptions amply accepted by the philosophical community: personal identity is contextually framed, and Online Communities are new contexts to which people’s identities are adjusting.¹ Both the question and the assumptions relate to a range of possible philosophical

¹ Here we should point out that, a decade ago, a group of scholars interested in Internet Studies held in Denmark a workshop entitled “Who am I Online?” Ess (2012) collected the papers presented in that workshop in a Special Issue of *Philosophy & Technology*. The issue covered various topics, from virtual worlds and narrative identity to embodied cognition and robotic experience to negotiating the self and disembodied communications. Notwithstanding the importance of that issue, its central theme was vast,

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issues, wildly interconnected in the literature on identity. To make some example, we can refer to the problem of “persistence through time” (Gallois 2005) “personal identity across possible worlds” (Sider 1999), the issue of “a criterion for identity” (Lowe 1989), and the problem related to “personhood” (Dennett 1988). Every one of these issues would benefit from a philosophical update to include how Online Communities affect the construction and maintenance of personal identity. To start the inquiry and limiting our analysis to a reachable grasp, in this paper we approach this subject by only considering two philosophical set of problems: the so-called “Characterization Question” and what we have renamed as the “Self-Other Relations Question.” Since these queries (that we will present extensively in the first section of the article) have traditionally brought out different issues around the concept of identity, here we aim at rethinking them in the framework of online communities.

To determine how both questions can be rethought in the context of Online Communities, we are going to adopt a comprehensive framework and different philosophical notions. The broad framework that, we argue, can best set our analysis is the cognitive niche theories, adjusted to cover also the specifics of Online Communities by Arfini et al. (2017). We will present in detail this approach in the second section, in which we will also discuss how an externalist cognitive view on the matter is necessary to focus on the effects of a system of external artifacts (so, Online Communities) on people’s identity construction and maintenance. In the third section, we will specify some philosophical notions that will direct our analysis. Specifically, we will discuss the problems related to the Filter Bubble (Pariser 2011), the idea of Affordances initially introduced by Gibson (1977), and a particular version of the Sartrean concept of Bad Faith (Sartre 2018). We will also discuss the Attachment Theory of identity (Rodogno 2012): this theory maintains that there is continuity between offline and online identity and we strongly agree with it. At the same time, we believe that some cases of identity construction online could provide for agents ways to create an unhealthy asymmetry between offline and online worlds. In the last part of this paper we will then discuss some phenomena that challenge our default views on the relationship between online/offline identity: the phenomenon of catfishing and people who participate to online self-harming communities.

2 Issues of Personal Identity in Online Communities

As briefly presented in the introduction, our analysis starts by considering how two traditional questions regarding identity can be approached differently if we refer to online communities as contexts for identity construction and exploration.

Footnote 1 (continued)

and it did not focus on what during this decade has risen in interest for both scholars and laypeople: social media and online communities. So, if then it was crucial to discuss problems of identity within the issue of the overall impact of Internet technologies, it is now necessary to ask the same questions within the new frameworks of online communities. The uncanny relevance that they have acquired as personal space, mass media, and cultural reference should be reason enough to ask now: “Who Am I in Online Communities?” So, here we aim at starting to answer this question, following-up on some of the issues already raised in Internet Studies.

To be clear, our aim is not to provide a straight answer to those questions (a paper would not be enough to complete this task), but, for now, just reflect on the implications that they bring up in this new framework of analysis.

1. *The Characterization Question*, defined as such by Schechtman (1996), (p. 73), asks “which actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires, character traits, and so on are to be attributed to a given person?” In the philosophical literature, this query brings forward a description of identity as contingent and temporary. Indeed, it refers to those characteristics that people take to define themselves as persons or to distinguish themselves from others (Olson 2019). Thus, in these respects, if people have an “identity crisis,” they are unsure of their most characteristic properties and who they are as persons. In this sense, people can give different importance to their characteristics, and they can freely define themselves by some of them and not others. Of course, people can also choose to describe themselves with qualities that they do not have (for example, some can define themselves as generous people without actually doing generous things).

Within Online Communities, people have the impression that they can deliberately choose and express the characteristics that define themselves by putting together their profile. To be more precise, users can consciously calibrate (and share) those characteristics (by choosing to associate their account to others, to like some pages, to share particular contents, and so on) but they cannot control what others see of those traits. Filtering algorithms elaborate further those data for other users, setting what agents can access or not, technically interfering with feedback responses and preferences. Since our identity is not construed in isolation, but it feeds on communication, feedback and interaction with other people, the interference of filtering algorithms should be considered in the matter of identity construction in online communities (this brief description summarizes the Filter Bubble problem presented by Pariser (2011) that we will tackle later on). Moreover, since filtering algorithms select also what users can see of their past experience online, we will argue that they have an effect even considering the Attachment Theory of identity (Rodogno 2012), which we will defend nonetheless as an accurate theory for online identity construction. Thus, as we will further comment, within Online Communities the Characterization Question has different implications than in the offline world.

2. What we can call *The Self-Other Relation Question* asks: “How do self-others relations affect identity construction?” We have condensed in this brief question many issues that connect identity construction and self-other relations. For example, both the philosophical and the social sciences literature usually depict social representations and identities as interrelated and codependent (Breakwell 1993; Elejabarrieta 1994; Marková i, 2007). In the words of Andreouli (2010), (p. 114): “identity is, therefore, seen as embedded in social relations and as dynamic, contextual, and relational. Social representations and the dynamics of positioning between self and other define identities.” In brief, how others see me, treat me, and how I act with other people affect how I see myself and how I react in turn. Moreover, within this matter, also other moral issues come up as relevant. One of

these issues regards responsibility, which is a core component of my relationship with others (Olson 2019, p. 4), and my sense of freedom: only I can be responsible for my actions, if I freely commit them. That means that how I define myself, also through my relationship with others, is relevant when discussing what for I consider myself accountable. In this context, to quote Olson (2019), (p. 4): “identity itself matters practically.”

In the framework of Online Communities, freedom of choice is a complex notion (even more complicated than if considered when referring to the offline world), and, as we already mentioned, filter algorithms are parts of the reasons for its complexity. Another issue that involves freedom, responsibility, and identity derives from the analysis of the concept of Bad Faith, developed by Sartre (2018) to indicate a state of self-deception regarding people’s freedom of choice and their identity (which also affects their sense of responsibility). So, a question that should be addressed is “In which cases do people find themselves in a condition of Bad Faith in Online Communities?”

By arguing that these questions could provide more food for thoughts if we address them considering the framework of online communities, we do not mean to argue that there are significant boundaries between online and offline worlds. Conversely, we defend the hypothesis that extending our offline reality with online tools and platforms has various implications related to how we construct and maintain our identity. So we aim at discussing in details some of those implications, especially if we consider particular cases in which online and offline identities seem to collide—such as activities of catfishing, for example.

Nonetheless, to proceed with our arguments, we need to present in advance an apologetic note. In order to discuss how users’ identities are affected by the engagement with online communities we will adopt perspectives that are not usually put together in the philosophical literature. In particular, we will refer to the theories regarding cognitive niches (which can be approached from very different perspectives, from a quasi-biological point of view (Tooby and DeVore 1987), to viewpoints that defend arguments of distributed cognition (Bardone 2011)), the idea of Double Mutual Anticipation (which depends on theories of social interactionism, (Hildebrandt 2015)), and the concept of Bad Faith (which emerged from the individualist and existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (2018)). Thus, we need to highlight that, by engaging with these concepts, we do not aim at either making their background theories interact or at proposing a coherent mash-up of them. We will precisely focus on cognitive accounts for all these notions (so we will exploit the fact that they describe ways in which agents process information on themselves and others) and take advantage of their appropriateness in debates on identity construction and maintenance. In particular, we will highlight the idea that cognitive niches represent an argument of the Extended Mind Theory. We will focus on the notion of virtual cognitive niches and so we will present online communities as way for the agent to extend their cognitive states and abilities, and, in turn, beliefs, concepts, and values related to their identities. We will adopt the notion of Double Mutual Anticipation in order to discuss how agents’ interactions on online environments are different from offline ones (which, for example, do not include

algorithmic-based Filter Bubbles) without presenting or necessarily agree with all the takes of social interactionism. Finally, we will illustrate a version of the notion of Bad Faith (which, to be fair, has already been presented by Magnani (2007)) that highlights the connection between identity construction and agents' sense of responsibility and which does not follow automatically from an individualistic account of the agents' identity.

Upon all these notions, we will present and agree upon the account of identity that is based on Rodogno's Attachment Theory (2012), which argues that the sense of self is related to what agents care about, which shapes their affective life and normative view of the world. To be clear in our intents, we will not maintain that this account of identity could well encompass all forms of online identity: in this paper we will only focus on the identity that emerges and can be expressed in online communities. With this terminological choice we refer to different kinds of online platforms, such as social media, newsgroups, forums, blogs, and mini-blogs; in particular, for the specific aims of this paper, we will refer to mainstream social media as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. We adopt this formula because it has the merit of highlighting the social and communal aspect that defines the phenomena we are taking into consideration, and at the same time, it is specific enough to avoid the inclusion of other platforms, such as, for example, online media, game platforms, and newspapers online.

Thus, after this necessary preamble, our analysis can begin with the unfolding of a cognitive and externalist perspective on online communities, presented in the next section as virtual cognitive niches.

3 Virtual Cognitive Niches

The core of the diverse and multidisciplinary set of theories regarding cognitive niches claims that the uniqueness of *Homo Sapiens*' development rests on its ability to exploit the environment in an epistemically relevant way (Magnani 2009; Bertolotti and Magnani 2017). The notion of cognitive niches fully considers the local and social dimension of the agents, as it explains their cognitive involvement in terms of the continuous sharing of information. In particular, cognitive niches have been presented as environments in which agents can extend their cognitive abilities (and even cognitive states, beliefs and values) according to the Extended Mind theory. Within this framework, a description of cognitive niches that will be of particular use for us is given by Clark (2008), (p. 59) that defines them as "designer environments in which to think, reason, and perform as well as special training regimes to install (and to make habitual) the complex skills such environments demand." Moreover, he also illustrates the activities involved in cognitive niche construction as [p. 62] "the process by which animals build physical structures that transform problem spaces in ways that aid (or sometimes impede) thinking and reasoning about some target domain or domains."

Engaging with this description and use of cognitive niches, Arfini et al. (2017) propose to call the specific type of niches that emerges in online environments "virtual cognitive niches." They define them (in part paraphrasing Clark) as "digitally-encoded collaborative distributions of diverse types of information into an

environment performed by agents to aid thinking and reasoning about some target domains” [p. 2]. The authors start from the assumption that, when entering the web, users face a type of ecology different from the offline one, and, by just getting into it, they modify it. For example, if they search for something on Google, the search engine will track various signals to establish a predictive pattern of behavior. This phenomenon is widely accepted and studied within HCI, cognitive science, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, cognitive ethnography, and social phenomenology. Of course, the authors note that the way people modify the environment depends on the mediator they use to enter it. Indeed, while the cognitive niches that we inhabit offline seem more immediate, to get into virtual ones we need to use different input devices, such as mouse and keyboard or a smartphone touchscreen, plus online tools, such as search engines, social network platforms, news media, and so on. These devices may present our online experience as a mere exploration without consequences for the virtual environment: we can have the illusion of seeing without being seen, search without leaving a trace. Unfortunately, this is an illusion, since every step online leaves a mark and affects the virtual environment (if not for others, for ourselves, cf. (Pariser 2011)).

Even if virtual cognitive niches, as now described, can emerge in various forms, Arfini et al. (2017) take into consideration one particular type of them: online communities. In particular, they describe social networks as the more relevant forms of virtual cognitive niches, considering their global reach and high social exploitability.² Philosophy and communication studies have already shown interest in social networks’ epistemic value since, in those platforms, there is a continuous exchange of information between users regarding both the online and the offline world. Arfini et al. (2017) distinguish the sets of data that agents can get from both the online and the offline world in two epistemic domains: the virtual and the external one.

Agents can get news of both domains in virtual cognitive niches. The virtual domain is the set of data that pertain to users’ avatars or profiles, nicknames, objects, posts, shared contents, and the way filtering algorithms present the platform to users and make them interact. The external domain includes data belonging to the real multi-dimensional persons, their surrounding material environment, and the world outside of the online platforms. Arfini et al. (2017) highlight this separation of epistemic domains because they argue that the contents that slip into the virtual domain can easily belong, or refer to, the external one. In a way, the online domain supports, extends, and enriches the contents of the offline one: this cognitive entanglement and asymmetry between offline and online world is an aspect that will be of crucial importance when discussing the dangerous possibility of an inverse unbalance between the two domains (sub-section 3.2).

² Indeed, social networks allow people to share information more than the internet ever did; in fact, virtual platforms such as Facebook and Twitter now aim at becoming essential sources of news, as also told by Mark Zuckerberg, creator of Facebook (Pariser 2011). Alongside this, the Facebook - Cambridge Analytica data scandal showed to the world that private information collected from our profiles could be worth enough to make our details one of the most valuable commodities (Bozdag and van den Hoven 2015). Even if sharing private information out of social networks is punishable as a crime, various agents can easily use it and reuse it inside the virtual dimension.

Of course, the external domain appears so because of our personal and bodily experience (physical perception, psychological state, conceptual background, and so on). In a significantly different way, the features of a personalized interface frame our virtual domain experience. More than that, various algorithms filter every content that agents encounter to give them a unique experience in that framework (based on their interests, opinions, past preferences, and so on). This made-for-you character is distinctive of the virtual domain. Users' online experience is not primarily unique because of their physical, psychological, or experiential dispositions and settings, but for the predictive frames embedded into the virtual niche that they are entering.

Acknowledging the difference between our experience of the external domain and the virtual one is not easy. The predictive algorithms work as invisible adjustments to the platform's interface in ways that make users' experience more enjoyable and familiar. So, in online platforms, agents see contents that refer or belong to the external domain as far as the virtual system predisposes it to make their experience pleasant, engaging, or entertaining. Users' profile is also a mix between what they want to show and what of those data algorithms filter for others (and even for themselves, since there are many ways in which social media platforms can show their users their past engagements with it - Facebook filters and selects "memories" for users to see, for example). Eli Pariser, adopting a strong view on how users present themselves, claims that online agents aim at hiding every detail they do not want to show and at highlighting what they like more about themselves and their interests (Pariser 2011, p. 65). Referring to Facebook, he notes, for example, that "[it] takes you more at your word, presenting you as you'd like to be seen by others:" in this respect, the virtual identity resembles more a performance. We need to highlight: a performance that is directed by a sum of algorithmic patterns and personalized interfaces (which will be highly relevant to discuss the Characterization Question, sub-section 3.1). This filtering personalization, according to Pariser (2011), (p. 9), generates a phenomenon that he called the Filter Bubble. The internet activist described it this way:

The new generation of Internet filters looks at the things you seem to like—the actual things you've done, or the things people like you like—and tries to extrapolate. They are prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you'll do and want next. Together, these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us—what I've come to call a filter bubble—which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information.

Social networks rely on algorithms and prediction engines to extrapolate users' identity and their choices. Once the site has collected enough information, it proposes on agents' feed those contents which they would most prefer, in part neglecting news that they might not find stimulating (Pariser 2011). When the individuals enter the niche and exploit it for various benefits, they have no way to establish (or decide) what specific content the platform is hiding from their view, or why they push forward a particular subject.

In other terms, online platforms (and their filtering algorithms) organize the sets of *affordances* people can find online. Psychologist Gibson (1977) has described

affordances as opportunities for action that can be picked up just by direct perception. Arfini et al. (2017, 2018) already discussed them as highly important features of virtual cognitive niches since they depend on the interaction between perceivers and their environments. This trait also leads to the creation and exploitation of what Nagy and Neff (2015) called “imagined affordances”

Imagined affordances emerge between users’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers (Nagy and Neff 2015, p. 1).

Imagined affordances explain the interaction between users’ social contexts, abilities, and purposes with technologies. On the one hand, they result from both designers and programmers’ top-down manipulations of the technological structures and users’ bottom-up feedbacks (as their use, misuse, and tentative actions) on them. On the other hand, they implement users’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectation within the possibilities and boundaries of a given technology.

So far, the algorithm-based personalization of the virtual cognitive niches, affordances, and imagined affordances in online environments, have been discussed as potentially dangerous for different epistemological reasons.³ In this context, we would like to adopt a different approach and examine what consequences the cognitive structure of online communities has on the construction and establishment of people’s identity, addressing the two questions presented in the introduction.

Thus, in the next section, we will illustrate two problematic issues (related to the two questions we mentioned in the first section) that affect users’ construction of identity in virtual cognitive niches: the limits and potentials of online characterization due to different features of online communities and how we should reconsider the condition of Bad Faith on these frameworks.

4 Understanding Identity Issues in Virtual Cognitive Niches

As we stated in the previous section, online communities, as “virtual cognitive niches,” are environments in which information and tools are shared and distributed to the users—sometimes from other users, sometimes directly from the digital platforms. Online communities then represent two kinds of utilities: an epistemically and cognitively rich framework, in which users can get more or less relevant data, and a socially fertile environment, in which users can interact through particular actions and “see” each other through profiles and avatars. The latter point also highlights another feature of online communities: they allow agents to present themselves as community members in any way they want. As we will further

³ A brief list of reasons why the filter bubble has been deemed harmful for individuals and communities: because it can fuel political, religious, and other kinds of extremism (O’Callaghan et al. 2013; Bozdag et al. 2014; Zakaria et al. 2018); various studies have proved that it is surely behind the diffusion of fake news (Arfini 2019; DiFranzo and Gloria 2017; Spratt and Agosto 2017); some have argued that is probably one of the factors that determine political affiliations and low disposition to change (Bozdag and van den Hoven 2015; Bozdag 2015; Spohr 2017).

comment, the interface of online communities *affords* (Gibson 1977; Nagy and Neff 2015; Arfini et al. 2017) particular actions of self-profiling and self-discovery that are rarely at disposal in the offline world. More than that, not only offline and online worlds are drastically different in terms of the availability of epistemic resources, ways of self-presentation and self-profiling, and self-other interactions, but the online experience of community members profoundly affects their offline dimension. Thus, it is also essential to consider a feedback loop between online and offline domains in any analysis of identity construction and maintenance.

To be more explicit, if many analyses focused on how the filter bubble and the platform interface of online communities create problematic self-deception processes from a socio-epistemic point of view, in this section, we discuss how they affect agents' identity construction. In particular, we will ask: what kind of identity characterization process is involved in self-profiling actions? In which way is it different to interact with someone and present oneself to the world online and offline? And which type of self-other relation is to take into account to illustrate the construction of identity online?

4.1 Who Am I in Online Communities?

When people fill in their profiles to get access to online communities, it is probably the first time they have done something like that. An online profile is dramatically different from any oral description that we need to provide to new people when meeting them, it is unlike putting down a list of personal data on an official form, and it is also completely distinct from any description of ourselves that we can put down on paper for school essays, introductory emails, and so on. A profile in an online community imposes bounds to the agents in the same way a form does (often there is a word-count limit, open or close questions to address, and so on), but it centers on what are our interests, what we care to divulge of ourselves, and what potential new passions we could grow. Users do not read it as an essay, so we do not need to concern ourselves with the possibility of annoying possible readers or be judged for our writing style. First and foremost, entering data in an online community means to get a specific audience for them, which can be represented by people you know from the outside world, but also people who have the same interests as you have, follow the same programs, are concerned with the same issues.

With this reflection in mind, we can agree with Rodogno (2012), who argued that online communities could favor the growth of a specific type of identity construction, which follows from his Attachment Theory: the sense of self that is related to what we care about, which shape our affective life and normative view of the world. More than that, we maintain that online communities display particular affordances that support the reception of our identity and others', creating an *extended* framework of people's community, consistent through attachments (as already stated, extended here relates to the Extended Mind theory and follows the description of cognitive niches provided by Clark (2008) and revisited by Arfini et al. (2017)).

In this case, the domain targeted by the construction of these cognitive niches is people's attachments and, transitively, their identities. Even if this reflection

could seem a straightforward assumption given the premises we just discussed, the “targeted” domain here presents some convoluted implications. Indeed, if the target domain is the set of attachments that people have, in terms of “other persons, particular objects, projects, or pursuits (such as careers or professions), ideas, and values” (Rodogno 2012, p. 312) there are two considerations and one question to put forward.

First, the online environment is not (yet, at least) the first cognitive niche in which the agents dwell. The first cognitive niches that allow and foster the agents’ identity construction are offline and define, since birth, their cognitive and epistemological abilities and processes. Online communities represent different environments in which the agents organize their attachments: in few other frameworks, for example, people have a profile that they can compile with all their interests, social connections, and that they can make accessible by choice to anyone or selected few. Moreover, the profiles, continuously filled in through time and the interaction with both other users and the platform, are also new for the agents: they are unique places in which people’s attachment identity is in display and can be explored, even by them. At the same time, engaging with online self-profiling follows from the previous experience of presenting oneself offline: at first, at least, users explore and exploit interests and attachments that they already know from offline experience. In time, by continuously engaging with the online world, they have the possibility of becoming more aware of their interests (by following certain trends or groups, for example). So, if there is an asymmetry of sort between offline and online domain (in the sense that the offline attachments are reflected in the online world), it is also true that a process of feedback is established between the two domains (since online experience permits agents to amplify, magnify, and exploit in unusual way their interests). In this respect, filters can make the interests of the users even more apparent to themselves: thanks to these tools, users engage more often than usual with things they like, approve, or are interested in and so they become more attached to some persons, values, interests, objects than they could be in the offline world (Pariser 2011; Diaz-Aviles et al. 2012; Davis and Calitz 2016) and they see the online dimension as a way to explore them. With this closure, another reflection arises.

The second consideration, which follows from the first, is that people can express their identity online in many forms: they can add features, data, details on their profile; they can upload and share external contents; they can like, share, comment, and refer to materials found in their feeds through the connection with other users. These are all possible affordances that users of online communities can adopt and that reflect their identity in these frameworks; better, that they can *only* adopt in these frameworks. For example, the possibility to *like* a set of contents published by other people with just a click and potentially no further interaction with those who uploaded or shared it is a unique possibility of online environments. Moreover, since people can express their online identity in these many ways exclusively on online communities, the way agents appear to themselves and to others online will be perceived and afforded differently in the offline environments. This consideration, which highlights the different modality of expression, display, and self-reflection in online and offline domains, gives reason to see the users as at least dual in appearance. This consideration, in turn, opens another point of discussion.

Indeed, now we should ask a question that has appeared repeatedly in Internet Studies in the last decade: is there a rupture or fragmentation of identities in the offline/online divide? Could I be a *different me* online? After the above two considerations, we think we have the tools to answer negatively to this question. To be more precise in answering it, though, we need to highlight the three main ways in which users become visible as individuals on platforms.

1. Through a *personal profile*: recognizable as belonging to an offline person.
2. Through an *avatar*: a profile with all the characteristics of a personal profile, but with what is clearly a made-up name or characterization.
3. Through a *fake personal profile*, intended to deceive other users. It appears as belonging to an offline person, but the name is made-up or belongs to another offline person, and the users express made-up interests, made-up personal connections, and so on.

The personal profile is a tool for identification online: it is a way to virtually extend the social connections, interests, and values of offline persons. In this case, it is intuitive to consider people's online identities as an integration of their offline ones. Since online communities offer different affordances to convey and reflect on people's attachments, they can even favor a more comprehensive view of their identities. In this sense, a personal profile does not make you a different person online, but it allows you to explore and engage more frequently with subjects and topics that you already appreciate offline (and even find new interests, that in turn can be revisited offline).

The avatar situation exaggerate this experience. Usually, avatars (strictly in online communities, as we already pointed out) are profiles that exploit and convey particular interests of the people who create them. They may expand the referential community of the users, while not directly mention their offline identities. It is a way to explore their attachment without the boundaries of online personal recognition. In a way, it favors, even more, the self-reflection of the users without being identified by others.

So, if we think about personal profiles and avatars, we cannot suggest that there is friction between online and offline domains as far as identity is concerned (and the offline world is still asymmetrically more valuable than the online one). Indeed, online communities seem to offer just ways to integrate, magnify, and explore people's attachments and identities. Moreover, since online identities do not exist in a separate universe from the offline selves, the feedback between virtual and external domains might be cognitive and or social. So there is strong continuity between offline and online identities, even if people create online communities of likeminded individuals that do not correspond to the communities with which those people associate offline. This happens usually because offline communities can be difficult to create (while online communities are almost fool-proof to generate) and not because people compromise and change their values, beliefs, and so on.

Situations of *catfishing* could represent a counterexample. The phenomenon of catfishing or fake personal profiles is usually defined as a deceptive activity or the

creation of a fake online profile for deceptive purposes (Smith et al. 2017), and it has represented a case of extreme interest in Internet Studies. To put down a few numbers, in 2012, the company “Facebook” (then the most used Social Network Site) noted that of its 1 billion profiles, about 83 million were fake accounts and many other SNS host a large number of fake or duplicate account profiles, some purposely used for “catfishing” (Kaskazi 2014).

Fake profiles represent extraordinary instances of how people reshape their selfhood in online communities. World’s literature contains many cases of mistaken identity (e.g., *The Prince and the Pauper*), deceitful disguises (e.g., *Madame Doubtfire*), and people who speak for somebody else (e.g., *Cyrano de Bergerac*). Still, cases of catfishing are paradigmatically different from these literary examples of analogical deception because of the outstanding role that trust plays in online communities. As we already argued at the beginning of the subsection, in online communities, the profile is an integrated extension to people’s offline identity: that means that any online relationship arises from a prediction of online understanding and offline feedback of this understanding.

By pretending to be people that they are not, ideally, catfishers need to create a system of online attachments that have little to no connections to their real identity. In brief, if I, person A, want to pretend to be person B, I need to express interests, beliefs, values that belong to my idea of person B. Practically, as reported by various studies (Hartney 2018; Lamphere and Lucas 2019), they rarely do so: they instead manifest more traits that are similar to their own (so of person A) than intended. Let us take as an example the case of “Joan.” She turned out to be a male psychologist pretending to be a disabled female; the two sides of this person shared the yearning to explore female friendships in online environments (Ess 2012). Other more famous cases involved coaches that pretended to be friends and companions of players to motivate them to play better. In these situations, the hidden motivation for these deceptions moves both their online relationships and their offline lives. In this sense, we could find a more suitable comparison between catfishing profiles and avatars: they are both created to explore, extend, and exploit attachment of people that they could not easily explore in the offline dimension (Smith et al. 2017).

Of course, we need to mention a hardcore difference between catfishers and people who use avatars: the ethical problems that relate to catfishing examples do not apply to the avatar cases. Nevertheless, this difference does not entail a difference concerning identity issues. Since people in both situations want and get to explore their attachments, the characterization of their identity is then so exalted and extended. In the end, it seems that the quote from Sherlock Holmes from the BBC show can accurately depict the situation for both avatars and catfishers: “Do you know the big problem with a disguise, Mr. Holmes? However hard you try, it’s always a self-portrait” (Stafford 2015, p. 123).

4.2 Bad Faith and Alternatives

This section should begin with the topic neglected in the previous one: ethical implications. Indeed, if ethics does not matter when referring to identity as a way

to answer the Characterization question, it is highly relevant when considering self-other relations. Indeed, the philosophical and social sciences literature usually depict social representations and social identities so intimately close (Breakwell 1993; Elejabarrieta 1994; Marková i, 2007) and, in particular, Duveen and Harré (1990); Duveen (1993, 2001) define the process of identity construction as the incorporation of how people describe themselves (the Characterization Question) and how others recognize them (in a feedback loop, obviously). In this view, social representations allow agents to adopt various possible identities to position themselves in multiple ways and orient themselves in their social world.

To do that, agents need to understand the axiology of the world they live in, as they need to behave according to their anticipation of others' behaviors and representations. At the same time, they also know that others anticipate their actions and representations. So, there is what Hildebrandt (2015) calls a Double Mutual Anticipation at the roots of social life, and, directly, also of social representations and identities. In Online Communities, the establishment of Double Mutual Anticipation is problematic for different reasons. First of all, the already mentioned filtering algorithms are a third party that affects how users interact. This means that the anticipation of behavior must to encompass also the non-transparent process of filtering algorithms: since they interfere with the double mutual anticipation between agents, the feedback and interaction is less transparent and comprehensible than offline (some studies trace back to this problem the radicalization of some groups online). Second, as we will argue, the mechanism of Bad Faith is not in play as usual in these frameworks, and it compromises the degree of responsibility of the users. We need to consider these factors to recalibrate our understanding of how self-other relations affect identity construction.

So, in this section, ethical issues will be discussed in relation to identity construction; but why should ethical issues matter in this context? The easiest way to refer to this query is to address the red link that ties identity to freedom and responsibility: if I act on my own free will, I usually am considered responsible for that action. It would be ludicrous, for example, to hold actors accountable for the deeds that they performed when in character. They are playing others' identities, and in that respect, they are responsible for the performance, not the acts of their characters. The matter of free will is much more complex and, as moral philosophy literature insists now, involves degrees of freedom and contextual boundaries. However, as debates go on about free will and identity, the link between identity, freedom, and responsibility has not been questioned yet.

That is why the topic of Bad Faith matters in this context. Bad Faith is a notion that Sartre puts forward not when dealing with identity problems, but with freedom and self-other relations. A significant debate has arisen in the philosophical community around this concept. Indeed, there is not a clear consensus on what exactly Sartre meant when referring to Bad Faith and in which sense we need to take the examples he put forward for it (Magnani 2007; Webber 2011; Tartaglia 2012; Flynn 2013). Thus, we can present a few versions of the concept, and a neat and comprehensive version of it is so far hard to find. In this particular context, in which we are discussing identity and responsibility in the framework of online communities, we may put ourselves at ease by highlighting some aspects of Bad

Faith, which are recognized by all scholars and that pertain to the themes we are analyzing. To begin the analysis, let's consider an example that Sartre puts forward.

Let us consider this waiter in the café. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually reestablishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need to watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a café. (Sartre 2018, p. 49)

This example contains much of the features of Bad Faith: first of all, it is the self-delusional belief that the agents have of not being in full control of their choices and behaviors (and so, their identity) (Tartaglia 2012). The person in the example plays at being a waiter because it does not recognize this role as something that he chose. Since agents believe they have no control over their decisions, actions, and so on, they only accept partial descriptions of their identity, while relegating other parts to "roles" that they need to play (in almost the same way that the actor we mentioned before performed their role).

Second, Bad Faith implies a problematic relationship between agents (Webber 2011). Bad Faith's condition arises when agents want to avoid deeply troubling feelings as shame and anxiety that derive from both the confrontation and connection to others.

Third, notwithstanding the derivative nature of Bad Faith to self-others relationships, it is described first and foremost as a self-deceiving state, not as a deception of others (Flynn 2013). The waiter deceives himself in thinking that his job is just something that he can role-play and, by doing so, he also deceive his costumers in thinking they have a sensible and responsible waiter.

Forth, the self-deceiving aspect of Bad Faith has an impact on the sense of responsibility they have for their actions (Magnani 2007; Webber 2011). If they considers some roles as externally or contextually imposed on them, they do not free to do something else and so they believe they cannot be held responsible for what they do when they are "role-playing." The loss of responsibility is just felt in their first-person perspective, though: they are actually responsible for their actions, choices, and behaviors, but the self-deception does not make them acknowledge it.

Considering what we presented of Bad Faith so far, we could connect the subject in various ways to the topic of identity in online communities. The first and most obvious connection that we should note is that, in comparison to the offline world, online communities provide an environment in which agents can hide some data about themselves while highlighting others with ease. So, in a way, people feel they have more control over their image online. Of course, this is also an illusion, since privacy issues, filtering algorithms, and cyberbullying

are phenomena that compromise agents' control of their online experience and are renown inside and outside the academic community. Still, the impression counts: if people feel more in control, they also think they have more freedom of expressing themselves. Hence that gives them the means to embrace the identity expressed online without issues. This almost causal connection between feeling of being in control, freedom of expression and identity, would also imply that a sense of responsibility needs to be associated with online identities, so warding off the possibility of being in Bad Faith in an online community.

The last consideration may be too hasty: after all, online profiles are selective, and the selection of information people share about themselves depends on two factors: (1) what online communities allow agents to share; (2) what people do want to share, and what slips out from their experience online and their contacts. Hence, they can express parts of their identity and not other parts, minimizing their anxiety and or shame. To make an example, we can quote a highly realistic case analyzed by Rodogno (2012), (p. 312).

Consider this case. After a long day at work, our repairman, Sam, goes home. Sam is single and is quite unhappy about that. He thinks that dating Websites may help him find a stable companion. [...] As he does so, he is asked to fill in the usual obligatory fields: name, sex, age, sexual preference, profession, and marital status. Sam is quite annoyed at his having to fill out one of these entries, namely, the one stating his current profession. According to him, the information required must be relevant to his real identity, to what he is really about, so that only the right kind of potential partners are matched to his profile. He thinks that being a repairman does not even begin to afford any useful information about him. [...] In fact, he believes that this kind of information is simply misleading in this context; it would convey the wrong kind of ideas about him. Sam has worked as a repairman only for the last few weeks and sees this occupation only as a temporary way to pay the bills. Sam is a violinist: being first violin in a symphonic orchestra is what he cares about. Since early childhood, he has dedicated much of his life to studying music and playing the violin. The financial crisis is hitting hard, however, and there are no prospects for a job in this line of work for at least some time.

This quote feels strangely similar to the waitress's example that Sartre brought about when discussing Bad Faith. Sartre explained how the waiter, too, recognizes a part of his identity as more important than others, and he adjusted his behavior, living a half-chosen life by being in Bad Faith. Of course, though, there is an important feature to add that discriminates between Sartre's case and Rodogno's one: in the latter, no one should doubt the efforts that Sam puts into his work as a repairman. The scenario does not tell us that Sam feels ashamed nor anxious about his work as a repairman. He does not "play" at being a repairman. He prefers to share that he is a violinist in this framework, because, as argued before, online communities revolve around attachments, which are highly subjective and may change in time and context. Looking closely at this scene, we cannot see any sign of the loss of responsibility that the Bad Faith brings, nor does it imply that Sam feels forced to work as a repairman. He understands that type of work as a temporary way to pay the bills, but it is not enough to label him as in Bad Faith.

As we can see, so, the topic of Bad Faith in online communities is more hard to find in online environments than when we approach offline situations. The only cases so far analyzed in which the extension of people's identity in online communities brings detrimental effects on their moral behavior is the catfishing example. Nevertheless, does that case count as bad Faith?

People who create fake personal accounts do not usually deny the control or freedom they feel about their identity. They do not make it to lessen their sense of anguish, anxiety, nor shame, but for curiosity, personal gain, or to experiment with different perspectives. They do not even loose sense of responsibility regarding their offline identity since they also feel responsible for the identities they made up (Hartney 2018). Thus, even if it is a problematic ethical condition for the agents that involves an apparent rupture in their identity, it cannot be labeled as Bad Faith.

We can take as an example of Bad Faith a particular phenomenon that emerged in recent years and attracted attention both from the academic community and the mass media: people who participate to self-harm online communities. These communities promote various kind of self-harming habit (from anorexia (Norris et al. 2006), to bulimia (Borzekowski et al. 2003), to self-cutting (Zinoviev et al. 2016), etc.) and they are of high interest when discussing matters of identity due to their (alleged) premises and the reason why they have members. The premises of these communities is to grant a haven for likeminded people who cannot express their true intentions, feelings, and beliefs in the offline world (Norris et al. 2006; Borzekowski et al. 2003). The reason why they have members is that this premise is very appealing for some: which means that certain people feel that the offline domain is not a safe place for them to express themselves and they ease the feeling of being stuck there, by participating in these communities (as reported by Ferreday (2003)). Moreover, some reports (Gailey 2009) show that people who participate in these frameworks struggle with feelings of loss of control. They participate to these communities because they feel they can resume control, at least in the offline dimension. We can say that their involvement in self-harming communities is similar to the actions people in Bad Faith do in order to distract themselves from the roles they feel imposed to them (as the person who role-play the waiter). If we add that anorexia, bulimia, and similar self-harming habits arise and are often in conjunction with anxiety, shame, anguish, the similarity to a case of Bad Faith is even more prominent (Boero and Pascoe 2012; Brotsky and Giles 2007).

In any case, we can sum up the perilous aspect of this phenomenon by reflecting on the asymmetry that it creates between these agents' relationships with online and offline domains. We do not argue that these online communities create disruption or discontinuity between online and offline dimension: on the contrary, while in standard cases the offline world is reflected on the online (so the former is in a way dominant on the latter), we argue that in these cases the trend is reversed. In a nutshell, since Bad Faith and the participation to self-harming communities compromise the sense of responsibility the agents feel concerning the offline dimension, the online world is the part of their connections that they value more. In the first section, we highlighted the significant differences between online and offline domains, and we argued that an asymmetry of contents resides in the fact that agents share, online, various materials belonging to the offline domain. The

online world is a place for the extension and the support of people's cognitive and social attachments: in the self-harm communities, the relation goes in the opposite direction. If these communities let the agents express the part of identity they recognize as authentic, then their offline dimension can be neglected, and they can lose a sense of accountability for it (Boero and Pascoe 2012). In this case, indeed, the online reality does not simply provide an extension for people's identities and attachments, but it furnishes ways to replace them (Zinoviev et al. 2016).

Thus, if it is reasonable to see Bad Faith as a rare phenomenon in online communities, it can lead to seriously problematic circumstances when it reverse the asymmetry between online and offline domains in the first-person perspective of the agents.

5 Conclusion

"How have online communities affected the ways their users construct, view, and define their identity?" As the discussion proved so far, this question is not a straightforward and clear one, and, as we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we could have approached it by focusing on a range of sub-points and topics. Of course, our aim in this paper was not to present a comprehensive and exhaustive picture of the issues that this question points at but to acknowledge the controversial implications that it unfolds when discussing some of its most pragmatic and relevant subquestions. In particular, we focused on the characterization question and the relevance of self-other relationships for identity construction. In brief, we could summarize our findings in two very distinct but ultimately equivalent ways.

The first way we can sum up what we have discussed in this paper is through a section-to-section analysis. In the first section, we presented a naturalized and cognitive perspective on online communities, describing them as Virtual Cognitive Niches, following Arfini et al. (2017). This naturalized perspective allowed us to focus on the user's approach to online communities as extensions of their personal, cognitive, and social life. In particular, should be noted that online communities in this framework represent ways to extend people's cultural and epistemological community; they support and expand offline values, interests, and social connections (part of people's Identity Attachments (Rodogno 2012)); and they provide new (ordinary and imagined) affordances to their users. After presenting virtual cognitive niches, we reset our analysis to understand identity issues in this newly introduced framework.

Who am I in Online Communities? We approached this question by arguing that online communities can favor the growth of a specific type of identity construction, based on what Rodogno (2012) called Attachment Theory, as they highlight the sense of self that is related to what the users care about, which shape their affective life and normative view of the world. Moreover, they offer new affordances that put in display people's attachments to others to see, but also they let users explore them: this provides to users means of self-discovery that are nearly impossible to get offline. On the other hand, they also present opportunities for extending agents' attachments in new ways. We discussed the fact that people can choose between

three ways to get access to virtual cognitive niches: through a personal profile, an avatar, or a catfishing profile. By briefly refer to literature on this topic, we argued that the catfishing account, which is the most controversial type of identity-reshaping online, could be seen as a radical way to express the identity through displaying peoples' attachment. Of course, ethical reflections followed.

In the following subsection, we indeed focused on ethical matters, discussing the Sartrean concept of Bad Faith. We analyzed that notion by focusing on four of its aspect: its self-deceptive nature, its relationship to the idea of freedom that the agents in Bad Faith refuse, the problematic relationship with others that the condition produces (since it involves anxiety and shame), and the detrimental effect on the agent's sense of responsibility. We argued that it is reasonable to say that the state of Bad Faith is not easy to recognize in online communities since the access to these frameworks implies a selection of features that agents share with others (and themselves). We also maintain that only one phenomenon online can be rightfully labeled as a Bad Faith situation: the case of self-harm communities. The users in this framework actually feel anxiety and shame for their offline condition, find a way to deny it in the membership to these communities, and, in turn, loose sense of responsibility and attachment to their offline dimension through them. By considering their identity as more "accurate" in the online dimension, so, the subjects enter an identity crisis, turning the self-discovery that online communities afford them into a way to self-harm their offline identity.

Finally, we also need to propose a second, less precise but more accurate way to summarize our findings in this paper: through a literary reference. Indeed, for what we have analyzed, people that use online communities as an extension of their identity are doing what Alice does in the masterpiece of Lewis Carroll (1869), (p. 21), when she is asking "Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else."

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