Conceptions of Digital Self: Understanding Identity Formation, Performance and Online Social Reality

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to understand the complexities of human identity in the digital world by breaking it down into aspects of micro, meso and macro that correlate to identity formation, performative self and social reality respectively. Each element of the online milieu is looked at through the lens of traditional social theory, with suitable considerations to explicate whether the meaningfulness that we derive in the physical world can be ascribed to the digital. Ultimately, this dissertation sets the stage for future research by providing an initial step towards arguing that, comparatively, the digital world holds substantive meaning for people in the context of their identity, their interactions and the environment they perform within just as much as, if not more than, the physical self.

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Introduction: The Ambiguity of Digital Identity

Problematic Representation

On New Year's Eve 2016, Holly Jones (Robinson and Graham, 2016) was unable to settle her bill at an Indianapolis bar due to the death of another patron. Upset, Jones posted on Twitter that this had ruined her night out, assuming that the deceased was merely a junkie who had overdosed and should not have been granted ingress to the establishment. The owner of the bar replied, elucidating that, contrary to Jones' assertion, the deceased individual was not a junkie but rather a fifty-year-old woman who had suffered a fatal heart attack. The post went viral and, shortly thereafter, Jones and her friends and family began to receive death threats. Worse still, in an attempt to assert misguided social justice, online vigilantes searching for females with the name Holly Jones in the Indianapolis area mistakenly sent death threats to women with the same name who had no affiliation with Jones whatsoever. This example depicts a situation where the optics of social media effectively negate the real-world characteristics of an individual, presenting an ephemeral snapshot of reality devoid of context and nuance, with evidently horrifying results.

Another example of social media dictating social perceptions of identity can be seen with the case of seventy-four-year-old Margaret Nelson. In early 2019, Nelson made comments on Twitter regarding her personal ideas about the construction of human gender, which other Twitter users, in particular trans-gender and non-binary identifiers, found deeply offensive and labelled as a hate crime against them (Kirkup 2019). Responding to this claim, Suffolk Police questioned Nelson to ascertain what had transpired, and ostensibly raise her awareness of the LGBTQ community and the dangers that hate speech against trans people can facilitate, and thus request

that she retract her Twitter statements. Nelson has also been harassed online by trans activists for not altering her opinions regarding the social construction of gender and identity formation and continues to receive threats. Hate speech is undoubtedly wrong, and ostracising people who perhaps struggle to find their identity is indeed reprehensible. However, are we to deduce from these examples that this snapshot of reality is an absolute definer of an individual's characteristics, once again devoid of real-world context or even considering other elements of digital identity?

Moreover, what does this say about deriving substantive meaning and potential credence from a snapshot of an individual's online performance of self? What is clear is that both these cases represent myopia and contextual omission which, unfortunately, are inherent in the very nature of social mechanics, at least at their current technological capabilities. Further evidence for the problematic use of social media as a primary determiner of identity can be seen in UK police forces monitoring Facebook and Twitter posts of suspected gang members, using algorithmic logic to predict recidivism (Yeung 2019). Ultimately met with scepticism, this strategy attempted to define particulars of behaviour and identity constructs which, in the end, represent a human rights issue (Schlehahn et al 2015). Similarly, in Canada, the DRDC, a government agency tasked with defence contracts, currently utilises computer-based predictive models to identity what they assert as "risk factors" (Munn 2019).

Using data derived from social media posts, existing police records and personal information from Canada's social services, the program ostensibly aims to stop people who are perceived as vulnerable from going missing. Critics of predictive

policing argue that there is a great deal of fallibility to consider regarding the accuracy and efficacy of these predictive systems that use big data (Robinson and Koepke 2016, Karppi 2018, Hälterlein, and Ostermeier 2018). Regarding the UK, racial bias has become a clear and salient problem, as the system has shifted towards predicting the likelihood of criminals re-offending primarily within poor black communities (Williams and Clarke 2016, see also www.amnesty.org.uk 2018). Whilst we can argue that the issue of minority association and the somewhat problematic fidelity of algorithmic analysis has raised questions about racial bias in identity, research by Brantingham et al (2018) argues that data derived from social media exhibits no bias and asserts credibility in defining identity. This is undoubtedly a contentious argument, which highlights a clear lack of meaning regarding what an online identity actually is, and that selective particulars of an individual's life, like social media posts, only provide a sliver of their individualised and shared realities. Moreover, the reduction of human identity to mere binary calculations may serve pragmatic and institutional purposes, but fails to account for the nuances of individual identity formation.

Reducing Our Identity

Why exactly is the collection of personal and public data regarding an individual's identity problematic? After all, it potentially builds a more substantive picture of a person, their particular interests and opinions. This construction of identity from big data streams is entrenched in the consumer culture business model and, indeed, is highly financially lucrative (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013). Thus, the return on investment capabilities of data capture are prodigious, and as more information becomes available online, more earnings can be achieved from increasing levels of

identity formation. Behavioural surplus is problematic due to the method, type and amount of data collection, and an individual's awareness of their agreed-upon submission of such data. Collection of data to form a digital identity is built upon the surveillance capitalism model (Foster and McChesney 2014, Zubuff 2015) and sousveillance paradigm of self data capture (Mann et al 2003, Mann and Ferenbok 2013).

What these terms mean and, moreover, their saliency in the construction of identity will be looked at in greater depth in Chapter Two, but both concepts form part of an area of research called social physics. Big data and social physics meet at the intersection of computer-based prediction models of totality regarding how humans behave and essentially 'do' day-to-day things, both individually and socially, where even the most innocuous data is retained for analysis (Pentland 2015). As with social media and its representation of identity performance, problems particularly arise in the idea that this data, collected by companies to form and predict potential elicitations attached to online identity, is essentially externalised from an individual's agency, raising questions about authenticity (Cook and Leberecht 2017). One such type of information collected online, consumer purchase data, once again focuses on a singular point in time and lacks contextual fidelity. Are we to assume that, simply by analysing data from such avenues, we can reliably predict or assert ideas that accurately represent a person's characteristics, independent of the nuances of their real-world self? By this predictive and reductionist logic, and simplified to an example of greater specificity, an individual who purchases a copy of *Hitler's Table Talk* on Amazon could potentially be viewed as a political activist who subscribes to Nazi

ideology. The point here is that the collection of raw data alone is hardly indicative of a person's identity and, when placed next to our physical selves, appears anaemic in its credibility.

Sensate capture, via smart devices such as phones and fitness capture technology, continuously collects data for analysis to further the construction of digital identity (Mann and Ferenbok, 2013). Surrendering personal data is now a conditional requirement for access to digital services that encompass consumer, educational and social portals of information (Zuboff 2015). Once again, lack of meaning is a key issue here, and a clear lack of agency regarding the construction of our digital identity. Perhaps all technological progress and social communication innovations are simply inevitable; however, digital constructs of identity need to be situated within a context of ascribed meaning, with a clear sense of exact agency. If digital reductionism is the trajectory human society is bound for, extracting a sense of meaning is critical to eventually building a definition of the constituent elements fundamental to digital identity formation and the performance thereof. We should also consider the macro element of this situation, regarding the digital environment we experience, as the very abstract nature of the online world appears to have no sense of meaning ascribed to it and, indeed, is only further convoluted by various, contrasting attempts to pin down what exactly the digital is (Anderson and Raine 2018, Betancourt 2006, Martin 2008).

When we socially interact, our tactile sense of the physical world has a level of accountability attached to it derived from a sense of ascribed meaning, which denotes specific behaviour. An example of this could be children playing in a

playground and the aspect of bullying that often takes place. In the physical world, negative types of behaviour are unacceptable because we can derive the problem from sensate experience. If the same type of behaviour occurs online, is it just as legitimate or does it warrant more salience due to the ubiquitous nature of online identity? What exactly can we derive from the digital social construction of reality, where the formation of online identities and performance of self takes place? If we do not attempt to address these issues, questions surrounding the legitimacy of digital identity will remain in a state of ambiguity and, moreover, result in a loss of agency in constructing and performing identity in a reality we do not understand.

Ascribing Meaning

In this introduction, the importance of online identity formation and performance have been demonstrated as a normalised function of the contemporary lived experience. Problems have been emphasised involving our lack of agency over the construction of our digital selves, while the issue of reducing people to binary equations highlights potential pitfalls. Perceiving social media as a snapshot of reality, the detrimental impact on people's lives is clearly evident, resulting from the myopic perception that people are essentially comprised of their online personae, omitting the real-world self. Thus, my argument is that to begin to address the problems experienced in the context of digital identity, an attempt to derive and ascribe meaning is critical in order to link the world of the physical with the abstract digital. Through the lens of sociological theory that has helped define traditional forms of micro, meso and macro experiences of identity shared reality this dissertation aims to find commonalities between the physical and the digital. Further, consider if the nuances of this new

divergent reality and the potential expressions of identity are comparable in authenticity to our conceptions of self in the physical world.

This will be done by breaking down the concept of the digital world into three interconnected elements: formation of identity, performance of digital identity, and digitised social reality. Structuring an analysis in this manner allows for a separation between elements of the micro, meso and macro, which run thematically throughout the paper, and an exploration of how the individual parts intersect. Before this begins, however, a bedrock of reliability is needed, pertaining to a sense of agreed-upon philosophical and sociological theory of the physical reality we live in. Why do we need this? The digital realm is relatively new, and current attempts to understand social interactions within it, while comprehensive, largely focus on one particular area, often without considering other aspects to support or even enhance their arguments. Furthermore, the digital is vast, nebulous and commonly ambiguous when attempting to ascribe meaning. The layout of this dissertation breaks down these complex aspects into the following four chapters, allowing a dissemination of the arguments, rather than one lump sum of information.

Chapter One provides a clear-cut bedrock of meaning ascribed to the physical world in the context of identity formation, performance of self and the social construction of reality, in a sense, a metaphorical lighthouse anchoring us to tangible reality and meaning by utilising traditional concepts of social theory.

Chapter Two

RQ1. Can identity formation be meaningful when reduced to a digitised format? (Micro)

This chapter examines the complexities of digital identity formation and potential meanings behind it, discussing behaviour surplus, digital reductionism and, in particular, the derivation of agency regarding one's identity in light of institutional construction, agency and meaning.

Chapter Three

RQ2. Are performances of self through online interaction with others more meaningful representations of identity than the physical self? (Meso)

The focus here is on the performance of self, considering case studies of social media interactions, online gaming as expression of gender, and what this could potentially mean in the context of authenticity of performed identities.

Chapter Four

RQ3. Can meaning be assigned to digital social reality in the same way as the physical? (Macro)

This final chapter examines the meaning behind the social construction of reality in the context of digital environments used to present the performed self, and the continued modulation of identity. Potential meanings ascribed to the digital world are also considered in relation to value structure differentiations with the physical world, as well as difficulties encountered due to the ephemeral nature of digitised augmentations of our traditional sense of time and space. The research questions of this dissertation aim to derive a sense of meaning from the digital world in the context of the micro, meso and macro experience of human reality that is comparable to the physical world.

Ultimately, this dissertation aims to demonstrate each element of the online world in its own unique setting, while also illustrating how the micro, meso and macro interlink and coexist to elucidate a clearer picture of the nebulous world of online identity and digital reality. A further aspiration is to determine, via theoretical enquiry, whether a framework of meaning might potentially pave the way for a definition that may provide perspicuity to a digital world that often appears ambiguous when trying to navigate the nuances of social interaction.

Chapter One: Theories of Identity Formation, Performance of Self, and the Meaning of the Physical Environment

This chapter provides a theoretical bedrock pertaining to what is sociologically and philosophically understood as the meaning behind tangible representations of how we build our identity, the elicitation of identities via social interactions and the meaning attributed to the social construction of reality. It is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of philosophical work by any means, rather a particular elucidation of key literature relevant to the overall narrative of this dissertation. The sociological theory of Charles Cooley's 'looking-glass self' will be discussed in regard to our construction of identity; then, building on this, Goffman's (1969) dramatological concept will demonstrate the nuances of presentation of self, providing greater understanding of how people utilise a plethora of performance fronts to navigate the social world. Finally, a brief examination of the social construction of reality will look at the interplay of projections of the individual's performance in a shared collective sense of human life, and the attempt to derive objective meaning from subjective experience of the physical world. An examination of these theories will form the necessary foundation to situate my research objectives, providing insight into the workings of identity in the physical world, and an essential reference point when comparing this to the digital.

Cooley's theory represents identity formation in the physical world, but also potentially interacts with aspects of digital identity, for example, in identifying meaningful attachments associated with modulations of self-presentation online, as per the aim of research question one. For the aspect of meso, Goffman's work regarding the performance of self provides a grounding in the physical world to

understand how we alter our identities relative to the people and environments we interact with. Thus, Goffman's theory may help to answer the aim of research question two, regarding whether digital identity performance is perhaps more representative in terms of meaning compared to the real-world self. Finally, the work of Berger and Luckmann (1961) is concerned with the social construction of reality, and thus seeks to provide a tangible set of rules regarding how we ascribe meaning to a shared sense of reality, represented in the macro aspect of this dissertation. Applied to the digital, in the context of research question three, the theory may help explicate potential derivations of meaning in the mostly ambiguous shared digital reality we currently partake in.

Cooley's Looking-Glass Self

Cooley's theory asserts that the mental image which constitutes a projection of self is deeply entrenched within our interactions with others at varying levels of influence (Cooley 1902). Firstly, he argues, we do this through the concept of the *mind's eye*, the mechanism through which we perceive our physicality in relation to other people. From this, we enact an idea of preferred, congruent, socially accepted responses, open to mediation by the people and environment relevant to the situation. Secondly, we construct potential interpretations that others might have of us and the *judgements* that they may enact relative to the aforementioned physical elicitations of our projected self-presentation. Thirdly, we posit *notions* of what others feel about us following their projected behaviour, via what is known as the *mirror self* (Shaffer 2005), once again relative to our self-presentation within the given situation.

Cooley (1902) stresses that this process of self-perception is not a one-way formula: rather, it continues to shape and modulate our projections and other people's social interpretations of how we are seen, thus relatively dictating behaviour (Cioffi 2000). Cooley (1902) argues that we cannot know how people interpret us from their own subjective sense of reality, only from our interpretation of nuance pertaining to behaviours enacted on us. For example, two people who find each other physically attractive may elicit specific behavioural traits towards one another based on their relative interpretation of reciprocal acceptance that manifests in the form of subtle gestures, body language and specific dialogue. Up to a point, potential compatibility is largely conjecture within each person's mind, alongside reciprocal demonstrations of acceptance, but such conjecture still allows for the modulation of self-presentation, if necessary.

Our interpretation of how others see our presented self is, as Cooley (1902) argues, always located in our *mind's eye*, but it is this sense of interpretation, and our responses to it, that allows us to modulate how others perceive our characteristics, including the salience of the surrounding environment and the socially constructed meaning assigned to it, which also denotes a specific type of behaviour (Sinigaglia and Rizzolatti 2011). For example, a university lecture hall determines a particular type of human interaction and decorum that differs vastly compared to a public house. Our construction of self, relative to our interpretation of the value judgements of others, alongside the potentiality of behavioural modulation, is able to account for environmental surroundings, but not so far as to be totally defined by them. Rather, due to the complexity of human perception and the reflexive malleability of identity to

adapt to situational congruence, the modulation of self-presentation continues, rather than remaining static (Hensley 1996).

Building on this further, Cooley (1902) argues that the environment itself is not necessarily the key determinant in modulating behaviour, but rather that our interpretations of others within the social setting shape predictive judgements. In the example of a lecture hall, the meaning and assignment of utility is essentially devoid of any substance until its socially constructed meaning is created through interactions, thus reflexively asserting appropriate behaviours. Through this agreedupon semiotic relationship, our physical environment can fully attribute meaning and, thus, relative elicitations of behaviour. Through Cooley's three-part process, our internal sense of self and projection of identity allows us to navigate the social world and form relationships. While the interplay between humans and environment is complex, and facilitates acceptable, socially congruent styles of behaviour, our concept of meaning is defined through our perceptions of self and others, and the attribution of varying levels of salience to specific social settings within the construct of living reality (Mead 1930).

Put simply, in the physical world, socially accepted styles of self-presentation and behavioural elicitation are tangible enough, in most situations, to avoid ambiguity, otherwise social interactions would lack any meaning and cease to function. With this in mind, how might these interpretations alter when the digital realm of identity intersects with the ascribed meanings of social experience and presentation of self? Our constructed, tangible reality, and its rules of meaning which dictate behaviour,

take an entirely new direction that moves beyond the limits of Cooley's (1902) empirical argument, although a reconsideration of his theory may still prove relevant. In a modern world of highly integrated technology, the social construction of reality, and ambiguities surrounding our interpretation of the world we navigate, become ever more nuanced, and thus a formulation of underpinned meaning is critical in order to potentially mitigate these ambiguities. Before tackling this problem, we need to understand the presentation of self in further depth, and Erving Goffman provides a great deal of salient theory to consider.

Goffman and the Dramatological Self

Goffman's symbolic interactionalist narrative (1978) is not only critical to building a philosophical bedrock for understanding the physical self, but also in regard to the digital realm. Goffman's (2006) metaphor of thematic stages in the context of life as one giant theatre attracts criticism, in part due to the perceived lack of true agency over one's identity performance and potential considerations of authenticity. From a perspective of sincerity and cynicism, our *performances*, as Goffman (2006) terms them, contain an element of ambiguity insofar as we perhaps never reveal a true self, if one even exists. To be clear, Goffman never argues for a true centre-point of self that remains completely hidden, instead asserting the backstage and frontstage paradigm to explicate our navigation of various social situations. Goffman's idea of self-presentation in the social world is more substantive than Cooley's insofar that it builds more pertaining to interactions between people and the ways that characteristics of self are expressed relative to the engagement at hand (Ponser 1978).

A sense of agency is critical in the context of sincerity and cynicism, for one could argue that, dependent on the social situation, we may choose to enact a performance that might be contextually necessary but lack sincerity and give over to cynicism within the internalised reality of the individual (Tseelon 1992). Contrastingly, an act of sincerity when presenting a particular social self may instil a sense of internal authenticity and truth of persona. Whether cynical or sincere, this amounts to the perceived agency of an individual to project a congruent format of self, relative to the context of social situations (Waksler 1989). While this process is mostly subconscious, we also actively attempt to modulate our behaviour at a tangible level, visible to the people we interact with. Goffman (2006) argues that part of our social performance involves what he calls a *front*, which is further broken down into three sections.

The performance, as Goffman (2006) posits, is formed from *appearance, manner* and *setting,* which collectively construct an idealised format of self-presentation. Each category involves a plethora of nuance representing both fixed and malleable aspects of physical and abstract details. Firstly, the *setting* in which people interact is argued as a fixed aspect, insofar that its socially constructed meaning and normalised physical location largely remain unchanged. Again, the setting of a lecture hall denotes a functional sense of hierarchy, and its meaning is conducive to learning without being oppressive. The setting and its meaning in part dictate the interaction, further substantiated by the lecturer and students, echoing Cooley's work regarding agreed-upon socially constructed meaning.

Secondly, *appearance* of one's self is another essentially unchangeable, fixed characteristic, constituted by things like physical size, race, age, perceived gender and other elements, like attire, that we might carry with us (Misztal 2001). To solidify this concept further, appearance is fixed at the hard physicality of understanding, but malleable in regard to selective items that modulate identification within the limitations of discernibility. Although a multitude of appearance modulators, such as clothes, can shape projected identification, the essential underlying biological truths, discernible in the context of the physical world, are unchangeable. For example, a human is still identifiable at a physical level as human based on our philosophical understanding of what that constitutes, irrespective of whether they choose to perform and identify as an animal.

Thirdly**,** *manner*, specifically the elicitation of particular physical characteristics such as gesticulations and facial expressions is, Goffman states, transient; a *personal front* constituting the expressive equipment that allows us to perform in a social setting (Tore et al 2010). As Goffman (2006) argues, this formula of projected stimuli, perceived in the physical world, induces us to act reflexively and prepares us to *play out* our contextualised identity at a given time. Congruence between these three elements requires internal consistency but, dependent upon the individual and the interaction, issues can arise. More specifically, if a performed appearance does not reflect the manner or setting, an incongruence may occur. For example, defined by the setting of the lecture hall, the appearance and manner of the lecturer must be in congruence in order to enable credence of hierarchy and normalised social flow. Picture an intoxicated professor, attempting to give a lecture wearing beach shorts

and a t-shirt, and the importance of congruence and flow between Goffman's three processes becomes evident.

Goffman (2006) states that this flow, dictated through *idealisation*, is key to our socially constructed mediation of performance in a given situation and the ways in which others factor into this paradigm. Through the mediation of idealised, socially congruent values designed to facilitate interaction, particular presented characteristics of the situational self are normalised, relative to the social context enacted through individuals present within our reality (Williams 1998). As such, each social situation, as Goffman (2006) argues, denotes a specific subset of necessary performance that becomes visible or hidden dependent upon the contextual reality. The performance of these contextual characters is referred to as *dramatic realisation* (Fallers 1962). More colloquially, we *'play up'* particular aspects of our socially constructed performance when we perceive it to be needed. For example, the lecturer might express their knowledge of a given subject through the use of particular grammar or academic language relative to the perceived intelligence of their audience. Goffman (2006) also asserts the contrasting notion of negative idealisation, whereby modulation of appearance or manner may be of utility in order to fit into a lower social status setting, for example.

Ultimately, Goffman's complex performance structures centre on the interpretation of human interactions that we partake in and our responses to those stimuli. Our constant mediation of the nuance that we elicit to others is what Goffman (2006) calls *impression management*, which involves our appearance, actions and behaviours,

and is salient to our sense of discernible structure as an individual within a macrocosm of confusion, uncertainty and ambiguity. Through our interactions, our performances of both visible and hidden characteristics are not selected arbitrarily, but with a sense of meaning, purpose and, perhaps most of all, potential social congruence (Solomon et al 2013). Having discussed the individual performance of self in the context of others, it remains to examine the social construction of reality that these performances formulate for our society to derive meaning from. In both the physical and the digital world, micro and meso expressions play out their formulations at the macro level of reality, and these macro-level constructions are incredibly salient to consider in building a comprehensive picture regarding the assignment of meaning. We collectively build our social reality from the micro and meso, thus it is important to understand some of the grounded theory of how this construction takes place and to see the inter-linkage of the macro to the micro and meso, traditional social theory in the construction of reality must be elucidated.

Social Construction of Reality

In interactions, we perceive meaning by interpreting physical stimuli that occur through elicitations of self, the response of others, and our environmental setting, and our social reality is real insofar that we believe and agree upon its construction as social (Burger and Luckmann 1991). Some elements of physical reality are defined as objective and subjective sensate experiences of human life, decipherable via the human mind. More specifically, Searle and Willis (1995) argue that objective or 'brute' facts of the world we perceive exist regardless of the construction of human society. For example, while mountains exist externally from our subjective social constructions of reality, we perceive them as having meaning and independent utility

from which, through observation, we can build our own understanding of their existence from the anthropocentric comprehension of a shared reality (Shultz 2012).

Our subjective interpretation of objective reality, alongside the shared social reality which constitutes functional society, is essentially where we assign meaning to the extent that it is agreed upon and thus normalised (Searle and Willis 1995). Without meaning, however, it would be almost impossible to navigate the physical world, since the construction of knowledge provides obvious utility for the progression of human society. We assign levels of salience and value to the objects we create, such as cars or tools which, without this, would simply not have come into creation (Potter 1996).

Through the empirical process whereby individuals partake, with others, in a constructed, shared sense of reality, the objectively factual and meaningful, from a subjective perspective, essentially becomes normalised from birth onwards, and built upon through interpretative layers that we gradually assimilate and derive meaning from through language over time. Three processes help explain how things become accepted as real: firstly, *externalisation*, whereby people set out their own unique contextual reality and, through interactions, construct social worlds relative to their individualised experience (Galbin 2014). This concept consists of the physical environment (independent of humans) and the social environment (subjective creation of humans). The social environment is further broken down into *material culture,* understood as physical things we make (Dant 1999), and the *non-material* values, norms, and meanings we assign to abstract elements of reality (Burger and Luckmann 1991). Meaning becomes more ordered when increasing levels of salience are attributed to an object or idea. Thus, a hierarchy of abstractions is built

to attribute increasing and stratified levels of importance which, relative to cultural nuance, can alter dramatically; for example, the concept of monarchy in Thailand differs somewhat compared to the UK.

Secondly, *objectification* is the individual perception of shared everyday life as a more or less unchangeable structure, normalised through an understanding that radical paradigm shifts occur independent of human agency (Gergen 2009). This idea is broken down into four areas:

1. *Institutionalization*, which involves the habituation and routinization of social behaviours perceived as meaningful and structurally functional to reality.
2. *Historicity*, where, through intergenerational normalised perceptions of unchangeable reality, the social construction becomes steadfast.
3. *Legitimation*: in this context, a constructed meaning utilising the previous processes is reinforced with a cognitive sense of believability, through functional necessity and a moral contingency value that is unchangeable. Religion is a good example of this.
4. *Language*, used to derive, sustain, and permanently embed meaning that is constructed as objective fact, from the perspective of an individual's subjective reality.

Thirdly, *internalisation* (Gergen 2009) describes an individual's assimilation, interpretation and accepted legitimation of an institutional structure, through the shared social experience they understand as reality.

It is salient to mention and differentiate between three sets of realities (Agnew et al 1994), which play a role not only in the context of the physical world, but also in the digital world.

First, *natural realities*, as discussed, are those independent of human existence.

Second, *personal realities* are subjective experiences that are perceived as real only within the cognitive functions of the individual who lives them.

Third, *social realities* are built from the collective, shared reality of objective facts that have been assigned meaning and legitimacy through institutionalisation.

It is critical to note that humans do not construct all types of reality; rather, we build things and assign meanings to objective reality to facilitate subjective understanding and functional abilities with which to navigate the three-dimensional universe. At our current cognitive abilities, the construction of social reality is perhaps the most prudent way for us to perceive a waypoint of differentiation for what is ascribed as objective and subjective fact, and independent or dependent upon the human senses. It is necessary to lay out this highly complex underpinning of the physical world, as defined by sociological and philosophical theory, before venturing into the potential ambiguities of interpretation in attempting to assign meaning to the ethereal realm of the digital.

The next three chapters will relate back to the elements discussed here regarding the physical world, in order to provide a reference of understanding for the theories argued. Points of intersection involving the theoretical work mentioned here are represented in the digital micro, meso and macro chapters that follow and, in having a sense of tangible theory grounded in physical reality, we can potentially relate these two human experiences and, aligned with the research aims of this dissertation, ascribe meaning to the digital construction of self.

Chapter Two: The Digital Realm of Identity Formation

RQ1. Can identity formation be meaningful when reduced to a digitised format? (Micro)

How might we conceptualise meaning regarding the formation of identity online? It is a complex task, due to its abstractness (Dufva and Dufva 2019), however an analysis of quantitative and qualitative elements currently considered relevant to identity formation, alongside a consideration of potentially suitable theory, may contribute a greater perspicuity of attributable meaning. To start, it is relevant to examine research in the area of social physics, involving the capture of big data and behavioural surplus, which constitute a significant part of online identity formation. Considering this representation of identity, and potentially asserting some sense of meaning, is the key research aim of this chapter, presented by separating the concept of online identity into two parts, quantitative and qualitative.

This division demonstrates a differentiation between constructs of identity and the difficulty of assigning meaning to representations that are largely formed of data and lack contextual relevance. Moreover, considering constructions of self alongside Cooley's theory of the mirrored self (1902), whilst taking into account the nuances of the digital era, may provide insight into how different identity formation types, existent in the online universe, retain a symbolic interactionist perspective, potentially enabling the derivation of meaning. In this chapter, firstly we will consider the quantitative surveillance capitalist model of data capture, which builds an ever-

evolving but potentially problematic picture of self, due to a lack of human agency and meaning; secondly, the qualitative element of identity and social media representation from a symbolic interactionist perspective, the potential for a derivable sense of meaning and the assignment of relevant social theory. By separating the qualitative and quantitative elements of identity formation, we can see each element in a much clearer fashion and potentially discover points of overlap. Moreover, as stated previously, the social flow of identity and interaction begins with one individual interacting with another, providing a starting point for understanding the online self before moving on to the meso and macro elements of this dissertation.

Quantitative and Qualitative Aspects of Identity Formation

Through the use of interaction-based services or applications on phones, computers and other various smart devices, we both knowingly and sometimes unwittingly submit large amounts of data (Chyi 2009, Puaschunder 2017). This can pertain to fairly innocuous information, such as the number of steps taken in a day or late-night internet searches, or highly sensitive bank login details. Everything is collected, collated and sorted into a digitised form of identity constructed of binary data that is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. In the previous chapter, the sense of tangible reality associated with the physical self was presented as rooted in the empirical. Moreover, the sensate experience of identity formation involves a multitude of human value judgements and internal interpretations which derive meaning. In this regard, we arguably have agency, or at least a sense of it. When we examine the digital however, the experience of identity formation, and control over it, becomes a very different process (Code 2013, Van der Nagel and Frith 2015). The distinction between quantitative and qualitative data provides clarity in representing different

types of online identity formation. What constitutes quantitative and qualitative types of data pertaining to identity?

Quantitative data makes up elements of information pertaining to internet searches, behaviour data surplus from smart devices and various online shopping engagements (Levy 2011). Qualitative data is best seen as elicitations of self that are snapshots but are centred towards images of self, in social media, for example, which often provide a brief sense of context (Snelson 2016) Both rely on an initial physical-world user input in order to exist but, as we will see, separation between these two types of identity formation becomes more apparent when trying to relate meaning to snapshots of quantitative user data.

This is a point of interest in the context of social sciences for how meaning can be ascribed to such malleable structures. Through empirical analysis of data collected in a quantitative and qualitative manner, a problematic loss of agency can be asserted, which plays a salient role regarding the lack of ascribed meaning. Zuboff (2015) highlights a lack of individual agency in the creation of behaviour surplus, big data and data exhaust (built from human input online), derived from the wealth of digital human interaction utilised in the format of perpetual consumer interest. Zuboff (2015) terms this surveillance capitalism, an institutional model based on extracting sensate data and human informational input via a multitude of digital devices, constructing digital identity from quantitative elements to be a reliable predictor of behaviour. In this context, these identity constructions could be argued to be contingent on how much a user inputs, but Zuboff (2015) stresses a lack of agency regarding the data used, and a lack of contextual meaning ascribed.

Can meaning be ascribed to quantitative data, or is something simply lost in the translation of the digital reduction mechanic? Looking at types of extracted data more closely, we may ascertain more nuance. For example, if information is extracted pertaining to an individual's personal interests in the context of online shopping, to provide a better user experience which accurately reflects how a person behaves in the physical world, perhaps there is some credence to be considered, especially when taking into account Google's predictive behavioural program (Choi and Varian 2012). However, referring back to the notion of identity formation, and Cooley's theory of the mirror self (1902), elicitations of identity are based upon the interpretation of value judgements in relation to others. In this micro sense of reality, it is difficult to apply Cooley's theory to the quantitative aspect of digital identity formation with much accuracy and reliability. Moreover, the formation of digital identity does not rely upon the traditional empirical frameworks that define the physical world we tangibly experience. Left with snippets of information that, on their own, are devoid of context and thus meaning, perhaps by considering a collective of all types of behavioural surplus data pertaining to identity formation, a sense of meaning might be derived (Laurent and Bouzefrane 2015).

Unfortunately, the majority of social science research examines quantitative-based evidence regarding identity through the behavioural surplus narrative, creating a situation of data exceptionalism aimed at legitimatising systemic behavioural prediction that is axiomatic and *a priori* (Laurent and Bouzefrane 2015). Little has been done to understand the qualitative elements pertaining to this area of social physics (Hautamäki 2014), ultimately demonstrating a separation between the types of online identity formation which potentially helps to ascribe meaning. There are

overlaps between the micro and meso levels of digital identity formation and the performance of self regarding contemporaneous research efforts, and separating these elements is important to better understand the types of data.

Behavioural surplus, which constitutes information from self-capture, consumerism and internet searches, is best visualised as a quantitative format, since the collected data inherently lacks context, not necessarily through deliberate omission. By contrast, social media is primarily qualitative in its construction, and largely pertains to the performance of self (see Chapter Three), but research by Jones (2015), utilising Cooley's (1902) looking-glass lens, argues that digital identity formation through social media interactions facilitates a digital mirror, which value judgements are essentially bounced off in order to derive value and meaning. I argue that this example is more aligned with the modulation of identity performance than identity formation. However, Jones does provide a potential framework regarding the construction of meaning associated with an online identity that is supported by academic theory and rigour.

This data can be best described as our digital traces (Reigeluth 2014), essentially 'breadcrumbs' of the interactions between physical self and online world in a multitude of actions. In the quantitative sense, it can include internet searches, online purchases; in the qualitative a photo post on Instagram or an update on a personal blog. The micro construct of digital identity formation thus differs from our real-world value judgement system; for example, an elicitation of qualitative imagery lacks any form of validation until others interact with it online, whereby, based on positive or negative responses, modulation of identity can occur. Interpreting digital traces to

ascribe a sense of meaning can offer clarity between the qualitative and quantitative elements of data collected for human identity formation online.

The difficulty in attributing meaning to quantitative elements is not necessarily a problem of agency, but of the ambiguity surrounding accurate representations of digital self, and suitable interpretations of value judgements. For example, the concept of identity formation as a response to internal value judgements in the context of perception of others simply does not translate to the online world, due to its current lack of sensate experience. Cooley's theory is thus relevant in the context of the qualitative elicitation of identity formation, but perhaps falls short of explicating the nuanced meaning of the quantitative. Young (2012) explores this problematic area of quantitative data and meaning by unpacking the virtual self through analysis of big data from surveillance and sousveillance (Mann et al 2003), also referred to as self-capture information. Similar to Zuboff's (2015) argument, although from a more sanguine perspective Young (2012) suggests the disembodied nature of the digital experience of identity formation allows for an itemised collection of human experiential data, through constant connectivity via our smart devices.

Self-Tracking

Young (2012) asserts, this form of digitised self-tracking sensate capture resolves the issue of human agency over data, allowing for a truer picture of self, that can be directly related to at any specific point in time, through both qualitative and qualitative aspects. Self-tracking is essentially an individual's autonomous collection of information about themselves, for instance, through Apple or Android device applications, highly popular within the fitness industry (Neff and Nafus 2016).This

mixture of qualitative and quantitative data alongside agency provides contextual value, and thus a recognisable form of meaning from the physical world. Whilst this may be true, it is largely predicated on the ability to enact agency over one's data, but does still provide a level of credence in ascribing meaning to the digital identity formation process.

Young (2012) also argues that the mechanism that provides clarity and understanding in the collection of big data can be seen in the personal data map, which provides a sense of tangible narrative, essential to identity formation. Bamberg (2009) and Young (2012) argue that through this lens, meaning becomes organically apparent and is no longer seen as an abstract and ephemeral big data construct. Moreover, context can be discerned through self-tracking meta-data, that links directly to real-world physical locations, providing a grounding in the macro sense of reality, and thus meaning. Our digital doppelgänger, as Young (2012) argues, provides a meaningful, fundamental counterpart to our physical selves, inextricably connected to us, rather than abstractly independent, and thus feels less nebulous relative to its qualitative and quantitative aspects. The sense of meaning ascribed to digital identity is directly tied to our physical self, but is contingent on the continued elicitation of data to formulate an evolving digitised version of ourselves. Mann et al's (2003) comprehensive work to understand the nature of wearable devices in the digital age that capture prodigious amount of sensate data supports Young's (2012) argument, suggesting that the ubiquity of this reality cannot be denied.

Mann et al's (2003) perspective on the issues with sousveillance, a more elaborate term for the self-tracking concept, is less positive than Young's, but does set out a

possible grounding for the derivation of meaning. In the collection of sensate data, our integration with the smart devices we use in daily life cross the boundary between the physical and the digital world. Mann et al (2003) argues that this relationship intersects with elements of surveillance and thus the meshing of micro and macro worlds in the context of physical and digital become commonplace in our modern world. Mann et al (2003) see this as an updated form of Foucault's panopticon of control (McKinlay and Starkey 1998), and that political power is enacted upon the social world. Whilst this may be the case, it is beyond the scope of discussion of this dissertation. However, what can be deduced, as Mann and FerenBok (2013) assert, is the sense of meaning derived from identity formation built upon the data exhaust (built from human information input online) we capture from ourselves digitally, through the enacted agency of smart device use. Of course, not all users of digital devices and/or social media elicit the same amount of personal data to construct the identity formation discussed here, but for the digital native generation, often involved in an augmented or poly-social form of reality (Applin and Fischer 2012) a digital representation of oneself is almost integral to functionality, deriving a deep level of saliency and meaning to its users.

Perhaps, then, we might consider the notion that a simulacrum of our physical self, built upon our submission of digital data, may hold some level of authenticity and meaning, especially as the boundary between these two realms becomes harder to discern (Sánchez Abril et al 2012). However, this should only be done when all data is considered and utilised to build a far more substantive representative picture of digital identity. Moreover, contextual narratives and timelines should be embedded within quantitative and qualitative constructs of self without omission, otherwise our

understanding ultimately becomes ambiguous and meaning is lost. Another important part of digital identity formation to unpack is the semiotic relationship between user and elements of the digital world, and here, perhaps, we might derive more sense of relatable meaning.

Semiotic Interaction and Identity

In the qualitative sense of online identity formation, semiotic interaction theory can assist in deriving more substantive underpinnings of meaning (Van Dijck 2008, Darvin 2016). Whilst Cooley's (1902) theory is particularly useful, albeit with some necessary changes, Barthes (2000) offers greater specificity regarding images of the self that provide insight into qualitative identity formation. Although somewhat dated, if we consider Barthes' (2000) theory regarding photography and the four points of intersection that image representation provides, being the 'mental self image, idealised self image, photographed self and public image', then its relevance to the digital world, which did not exist in Barthes' time, can be seen. Of course, ownership of the photograph in this modern age lies with the individual, via smart devices such as camera phones, thus Barthes' (2000) theory should be modified to take this into account. However, presenting an idealised image to the global public stage derives a sense of self-worth defined by relevant and popular cultural influences at the time (Van Dijck 2008).

Thus Barthes' (2000) theory supports the attribution of meaning to digital identity formation through understanding the salience that the image of self represents. Moreover, the modulation of the digital self echoes Barthes' (2000) argument in the context of mental and cultural aspects of image representation, but what is new here,

and exclusive to the digital formation process, is the near-infinite malleability of self-image, never static, but rather in search of a culturally directed ideal, providing a sense of meaning to strive towards. More simply put, in our search for the idealised image of human physicality, modified images on social media sites, like Instagram, represent a hyper-reality that cannot be truly attained, but holds a sense of meaningfulness that people aim for in their lives, regardless of its authenticity.

The semiotic relationship regarding the continued modulation of self represents an endemic function of the digital culture age (Buckingham 2008), and online identity formation mechanisms are deeply embedded in the trans-media market, consumerism, and the ubiquitous nature of social media presentation, providing the platforms to modulate ourselves, thus driving the perpetuation of meaning (Lemke and van Helden 2009). We may consider elements of this modern identity formation paradigm somewhat pernicious or problematic, but deriving meaning from this is ultimately preferable to ambiguity. Georges and Libbrecht (2009) separate the qualitative digital identity formation process into semiotic functions defined as declarative, acting and calculated identity elements. This helps to provide a sense of structure to the inherent abstractness by suggesting a tangible and progressive flow to analyse.

To enact identity formation, Georges and Libbrecht (2009) state that the declaration process requires the physical-world input of data pertaining to self in order to construct the initial digital identity. Acting identity is perceived through interaction with judgements from other online users, reflecting Cooley's argument, and Georges and Libbrecht (2009) argue this point using an example of the Facebook friends

association**.** Essentially, Facebook friends lists are made up of physical and digital world associations that vary in importance to an individual in the context of internal value, for example, the frequency and content of interactions with these associated individuals.

This process of calculated identity and the derivation of meaning regarding identity formation built from the friends list in a person's Facebook account is key here. In the example, the system's algorithmic assessment of qualitative and quantitative data, such as number of personal elicitations, types of conversational engagements, types of pictures posted, and numbers of friends, establishes a perpetual loop of user engagement pertaining to identity formation and modulation (Georges and Libbrecht 2009). This is intertwined with the semiotic relationship around assignment of cultural meaning provided by the system's structural assessment, which algorithmically assigns salience from user input. Thus we can assert that meaning can be ascribed to some elements of digital identity formation, but only as long as we are willing to redefine aspects of theory and human values that have been typically embedded in the physical world. The problem lies in the abstraction and potential distance of the representation of self to collected data which, in the context of behaviour surplus, can be difficult to relate to.

The reductionist mechanisms of social physics may appear innocuous to some, a minor fee to pay for entry into the digital world. However, the lack of agency, and potential for ambiguity, is problematic and, whilst Cooley's (1902) theory does provide insight into the derivation of meaning in the qualitative sense, it fails to do so in the quantitative. In the context of the qualitative, however, we can derive a sense

of meaning stemming from real-world idealised forms of self, which manifest online in identity formation and, through algorithms, allow for mediations of relevance that present themselves in cultural nuance.

This chapter has attempted to achieve the research aim of ascribing meaning to digital identity formation in the context of the micro and, while it has in some respects, in others it has struggled due to the current difficulty in interpreting quantitative elements of self and relating context to derive meaning. However, while quantitative and qualitative elements of identity formation are indeed separate, they overlap when data is contextualised and given a place to express its meaning. For example, the collection of data from self-tracking is quantitative; without context, it is merely numbers. When this data is shared to represent an individual interest, others with similar interests can interpret it as a form of specific identity presentation. Our ownership of smart devices allows for a quantified self (Lupton 2016) and the ability to represent one's identity by images only gains meaning when others interact with it. Much like in the physical world, the things we do and the ways we form our identity are built upon interactions with others, so whilst the quantitative self can appear somewhat ambiguous, through the lens of context and consideration of the qualitative, we can better understand it and find relatable meaning.

This does not dismiss the problematic nature of data exhaust, nor ignore the potential lack of agency regarding our personal data, but rather suggests a way to provide perspicuity to an inherently complex social construct of the twenty-first century. The micro aspect discussed in this chapter is only one part of a larger picture, the individual in the context of their physical and digital world interactions with others,

and to understand the way we partake in people's lives, we must look at the online performance of self, leading us to the meso chapter of this paper.

Chapter Three: Online Performance of Self

RQ2. Are performances of self through online interaction with others more meaningful representations of identity than the physical self? (Meso)

This chapter aims to look at the multidimensional aspect of online performance of self through the lens of several examples featuring social media/dating, online gaming and the utilisation of modulated language, in an attempt to ascertain, as stated in the second research aim, whether online performances of self are meaningful comparable to their physical-world counterparts. Whereas the previous chapter's research aim attempted to derive meaning from digital identity formation from a micro perspective, this chapter builds on this concept at the level of meso-constructed reality. The aspect of meso is important to recognise as the logical progression of this dissertation's argument towards the derivation of meaning attached to digital identity, since, when our performances interact with others, our sense of self is exposed to a plethora of different personalities.

In Chapter One, Goffman's (1969) dramaturgy of self was a key element of sociological theory in understanding the dynamics of human interaction and how we effectively 'act out' a performance of identity when needed. With consideration of Cooley's (1902) theory of the mirrored self, and taking into account various nuances pertaining to the digital world, I intend to suggest that dramaturgy, with suitable modulation, can still offer academic support towards ascribing meaning to online identity performance. To do so, this chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, performance of self in the context of social media and online dating is discussed, and whether the credibility of these projected identities can be argued as truly representative relative to our physical-world selves. Secondly, an important

supporting argument regarding the performance of self and authenticity involving gender expression in online gaming elucidates the mechanisms of digital avatars as potentially legitimate projections of identity which, to the individuals performing within this paradigm, are deeply meaningful. Thirdly, the salience of language and conversation is integral to our elicitation of identities, in both the physical and digital worlds, and these are fundamentally changing in light of the evolution and inclusion of technology.

Social Media and Online Dating

When trying to ascertain meaning in the performance of self, we should consider multiple elicitations of identity in terms of their authenticity when compared to those of our physical-world counterparts (Haimson and Hoffmann 2016). In the introduction, social media was demonstrated to be a problematic primary definer of character, since it is merely a snapshot of one's reality and lacks context. However, as technology integrates further into our lives, we spend more time performing elicitations of self online (Taylor 1999, Haimson and Hoffmann 2016, Kimmons 2014) and, if this is to become a normative reality regarding social interactions, some sense of clarity is needed. Human social interactions, in the context of online dating, for example, provide a wealth of information to assess, as they allow a unique mechanism to perform different identities across various platforms, with a multitude of different romantic interactions, at the same time (Bahiya, A., 2018, Cichosz 2013). Research conducted by Kalinowski and Matei (2011) explores the nuances of this type of interaction, and the socially produced self, looking at internal strategies of

individual presentation in the online dating environment. Goffman's (1969) theory of self-presentation explicates how the social norms experienced by online dating site users directly feed into their performance of self, in the form of positive and negative stimuli, providing a point of intersection between the two realities that impacts interactions with others. Breaking this down, online dating site users perform singular or multiple digital versions of themselves, that factor in real-world elements, such as actual physicality, which can be typified by photographs of oneself. If interested, other users contact each other and conversation begins. Kalinowski and Matei (2011) stress that social norms regarding conversational style and specific gender performances, relatively shaped by current cultural influence, are played out in a hyper-reality setting. This hyper-reality, which allows for romantic discourse, is not only pervasive enough to modulate the digital representations of a user, but can also warrant a physical-world alteration of their performance of self. In this digital elicitation of self regarding the online dating platform of social interaction, meaning is derived from a sense of congruence with and acceptance of ascribed norms of the digital community, where users will capitulate and alter themselves in order to suit the current dominant social narrative.

Goffman's (1969) dramaturgy is clearly relevant here, and supports the argument regarding multiple performances of self, as Goffman (1969) stated that the 'audience' and the 'stage' are key factors that determine which identity is played out. These meso interactions in the online dating world form only one of many examples of the digital social reality that we perform our identities in, and other applications, such as

Tinder, which focus on physicality of users over substantive discourse (Tyson et al 2016), could warrant further investigation which, while beyond the scope of this dissertation, is nonetheless important to note. Social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter, as mentioned in the introduction, are a place for deep online discourse or simplistic colloquial and ephemeral conversations, thus representing another platform to examine in attempting to ascribe meaning.

Regarding social interactions at both the micro level, the formation of identity, and the meso level, the performance of self, one potential commonality which provides a derived sense of meaning is the embedded structural set of social and cultural norms present within physical and digital realities. With the current salience of social media, and its accepted integral function in modern life as a proxy for interactions, we choose to play out our identities online and engage in discourse. As mentioned in Chapter One, problems with the digital identity paradigm become apparent when users of social networking sites (SNS) are ostensibly held accountable to a single post, or to a profile of information that pertains to their personality but fails to accurately represent it. From a meso perspective, these elements gain potential legitimacy as markers of character, with SNS users believing the information they see on screen, and relegating the nuances of physical self as secondary. A key consideration here is whether this performance of self in the context of SNS denotes a cogent level of authenticity (Akbari 2018).

Pearson (2009) investigates the performance of self in the context of SNS, through consideration of Goffman's (1969) impression management. Pearson (2009) argues that the performance of digital identity in a deeply culturally mediated environment,

such as SNS, allows for a unique multidimensional elicitation of self, exclusive to the internet age, that would be impossible to replicate in the physical world due to limitations of time and distance. Goffman's (1969) front-stage is salient to elucidate here, as Pearson (2009) argues that projections of self intersect at a level of social functionality which online performance facilitates, and that managing potentially ephemeral and substantive relationships through colloquial quick-fire conversation or deep discourse respectively is exclusive to the SNS platforms.

Pearson (2009) further argues that SNS, through the lens of Granovetter's (1977) strong and weak social ties theory, allows for constant mediation of user performance to take place, potentially suggesting that this entire macro-level reality, which allows for the expressive creation, modulation and performance of self online, is an authentic and representative elicitation of identity. However, this online iteration could only be considered truly reflective of the complexity and nuance of its physical counterpart if all performance-of-self data was collated together to build a comprehensive profile of digital identity; otherwise, we are again left with a problematic snapshot of reality, where an individual’s perceived character is reduced to a highly myopic level of contextual omission due to a lack of consideration of their physical counterpart, as highlighted in Chapter One.

Considering Goffman's (1969) impression management regarding the physical-world presentation of self (Chapter One), individuals modulate their behaviour to facilitate cohesive and congruent elicitations of self in order to participate in social situations. If only to provide a front-stage façade of identity out of perceived necessity, we can rely upon this modulation as a relatable element from which to derive meaning within

social interactions. With this in mind, can the modulation of impression management in online social interactions be given a similar level of credence regarding the representative authenticity of performance of self? Koole (2010) argues this point with a consideration of the human sense of belonging in online networked communities, such as social media platforms.

More specifically, Koole (2010) highlights the level of legitimacy assigned to social congruence at the meso level of human interactions, and user modulation regarding the performance of self in what she defines as cognitive resonance. Koole (2010) explicates this mechanism of digital identity performance, combining Goffman's (1969) dramaturgy and Foucault's technologies of the self (McKinlay and Starkey 1998) to build a concise picture of its manifestation in the online world. Our concept of self-expression is formed from aspects of cultural, structural, political, technical and personal agency, the fundamental pillars of user action, through which we play out the online performance of self relative to the people around us and the social environment experienced at the time. This web of identity (Koole 2010) is not bound by the confines of physical location but is still directly influenced and tied back to it as a centre-point of tangible reliability and an existentially stable intersection of homeostatic reality (Chayho 2008, Christensen 2003).

Again, we can deduce from this that the origin of meaning derived from the digital realm of self-performance is rooted in the tangible physical world, thus providing support for the research aim of this chapter, in ascertaining a meaningful digital performance comparative to the physical. While the cognitive resonance model provides academic support to argue for a sense of relatable, grounded meaning

regarding the performance of self and participation in social interactions online, digital social structures differ radically from those in the physical world. For example, considering perceptions of class hierarchy in the performance of self, digital platforms allow for personal transitions between notions of recognised class, through self-expression of topical discourse in SNS platforms like Twitter.

Moreover, linking a tangible expression of the performance of self directly to the physical world is, as Koole (2010) argues, inherent in the SNS environment. This key element of her paper suggests that digital access to information is facilitated by technology, and mediation of the performed self can traverse typical conceptions of what physical world identities consist of. Essentially, the digital performance of self effectively allows anyone to be anyone or anything at any given time, anywhere, and although they may appear separate, these digital performances are connected with the physical world, and are malleable. Thus, our performance of self online could credibly be termed authentic but, once again, we must consider all relevant data available and, moreover, recognise these digital linkages with the physical world. It is clear that the mechanisms of SNS are deeply embedded in our modern lives (Schwartz and Halegoua 2015, Kapoor et al 2019, Statista 2017), but to argue conclusively that the online performance of self is meaningful, we need more evidence.

Wellman and McEwen (2013) provide more information in this respect, arguing that the networked self allows for unique expressions of performances that would not be achievable in the physical world. Once again, this manifests in strong and weak ties

(Granovetter 1977) where, as Wellman and McEwen (2013) argue, the micromanagement of relationships through multimedia platforms, including but not limited to SNS, allows a sense of the meso-reality of intimate interactions. For example, we can perform an online identity which interacts with other users, forming ties that are set into a perceived value hierarchy. In the context of the digital world, strong ties can be based upon pre-existing physical-world relationships as well as online ones. Weak ties online can be seen as ephemeral and can be thrown away if deemed necessary by the individual.

The derived sense of meaning, as Wellman and McEwen (2013) argue, is not necessarily tied to an original physical-world interaction, but can exist purely from a digital standpoint. For example, in a SNS environment, we perform a specific self, or multiple selves, interacting with others to form relationships mediated via strong and weak ties. Is this performed self any less authentic because it does not originate in the physical world? Not necessarily: our performance of self would then always be considered as a tertiary expression of identity in the context of a hierarchy of preferred experiential reality in which, historically, the digital self has been perceived (Raine and Wellman 2012). Thus, by what physical-world linkages should our online performance of self be considered most representative? As Raine and Wellman (2012) suggest, the platforms of SNS and online gaming, with their nuances of gender expression, offer a potential avenue to explore regarding the performance of self.

Online Gaming and Gender Expression

In providing insight into the performance of self in the digital world, gender expression is a deeply personal elicitation of character and thus could potentially further authenticate a meaningful representation of who we choose to be. Turkle's (2005) social research has consistently investigated how individuals place credence into the construction of a digital avatar that ostensibly represents their perceived identity in the meso-interactive world of Massively Multi-player Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs). Whilst gaming has historically been seen primarily as a form of escapism (Calleja 2010), or even suggested as an avenue for potentially problematic behaviour (Anderson et al 2010), evidence surrounding individuals enacting a perceived 'truer' sense of performed self has contested these typical connotations of negativity (Ratan 2013).

Cole and Griffiths (2007), through their research into user time spent in MMORPGs alongside levels of social interaction, indicated that the attributed sense of authenticity that individuals stated they experienced in terms of performance of self, manifested in the game as a digital avatar of their own creation, warranted more credence as their preferred elicitation of identity. By creating a digital proxy to represent themselves, users felt removed from negative social judgements inherent in the physical world, as some users identified with inverse or neutral genders comparable to their physical-world selves, and thus felt free to perform a truer representation of themselves in the MMORPG environment. This example provides evidence that the level of technological interface and mechanisms of mediation regarding the online performance of self allows for a credible account of authenticity

pertaining to a person’s sense of preferred micro and meso experiential shared reality.

Crowe and Watts (2014) challenge this normative reality, arguing that perceived gender constructs are not fixed, but are instead deeply malleable within digital environments, such as MMORPGs. Moreover, idealised forms of self are constructed to exist in the digital world, facilitating interaction with others as well as being meaningful to the creator. Both female and male participants in the study stated that the performance of self, manifested in their idealised construction of preferred gender, was unique to the digital environment of MMORPGs, but was also authentic, both in their experiential reality and in the context of social interactions and online communities.

Crowe and Watts (2014) also highlight the point that the ability to construct a representation of self in the form of a digital avatar, which is not limited by physical-world cultural or ideological concepts of masculinity and femininity, is not necessarily restricted to perceptions of physicality. It is rather only one aspect of the performance of self, alongside continuous interactions within digital communities that provide substantive authenticity in enacting a meaningful digital identity. Crowe and Watts (2014) term this 'Gender Bending' in the context of self-performance, not in a pejorative sense, but as a mechanism of expressive identity formation born of the digital milieu, which should be given legitimacy and not merely treated as a form of sophisticated role-play.

The unique platform of online gaming, and particularly MMORPGs, provides a mechanism of action that enables a user to elicit a preferred cognitive resonance to perform a projection of self, or multiple selves, that clearly holds credence in being internally perceived as meaningful (Klimmt et al 2010). Another integral element of these environments is the communication that takes place, and the use of language shaped to accommodate the nuances of the digital era. Thus, the final section of this chapter explores the modulation of language and online conversation in the context of performance of self.

Language and Conversation

Language is the mechanism that allows us to facilitate interactions and understanding between individuals, linking micro and meso levels of reality. Arguments have been made that the digital world is breaking down traditional elements of language and conversation in the physical world, as it is axiomatically perceived to be of secondary quality compared with face-to-face discourse (Truch and Hulme 2004, Dizikes 2015, Rushkoff 2019). Why should we consider this a salient point pertaining to the performance of self? As discussed, both our identity formation and performance of self in the digital world ascribe meaning to particular elements, thus language plays a key role in social interactions. In the physical world, we can detect nuances of facial expression during conversations, but when we shift to the online world, these can be difficult or problematic to ascertain.

Turkle (2016) argues that conversation in the digital realm, specifically online, lacks authenticity and, furthermore, potentially breaks down the likelihood of physical-world discourse, to some extent eroding the pillars of what makes us human. Language

and conversation, in the context of digital interaction, a key part of the performance of self, is thus deemed to be less authentic because it is reduced or essentially separated from its tactile, sensate experience. But is this really the case? The crux of the problem, as Turkle (2016) argues, is that through the mechanism of multi-tasking, our conversational quality declines substantially compared to our physical-world performance of discourse. Whilst we could argue that the quality of language and conversation are indeed radically altered online, could this merely be due to the natural expediency and efficiency of the digital paradigm inherent in this abstract world?

Looking at Twitter, for example, which limits its users to 280 characters per tweet (Perez 2019), one could argue that language stripped down to its bare bones, and lacking any conversational nuance, has become a normative reality (Piller and Kalnins 2018). This is simply not the case, however, as research from Rudder (2014) argues that the lexical density and word frequency used on Twitter demonstrates that, although language is fundamentally changing online, it is not becoming less sophisticated or 'bad', as some critics have claimed. From this, we can assert that in the performance of self, the use of language and engagement in online discourse does hold meaning and is not reduced to a simplistic format, lacking authenticity compared to the physical world.

Ahmed and Talib Al-Kadi (2018), for example, demonstrate that what they term 'Internet English' has become commonplace throughout the digital milieu of social discourse, essentially shaping both spoken and written elements. Furthermore, they highlight the legitimacy and relevance of this new form of English, typified by its

contracted and symbolic form. Also presented here is the increased use of emoticons to elucidate to others how individuals feel during communication, which can convey a surprising amount of nuance regarding a person's thoughts or feelings. Similarly, Soffer (2012) finds that digital platforms of discourse allow a new flow of postmodern language that has authenticity and meaning through the social legitimizing process.

The notion of a 'liquid language', as Soffer (2012) terms it, thus supports an assertion that the digital performance of self utilises a new formulation of conversation, perpetuating a level of authenticity which reinforces itself through elements of cultural and social salience, ultimately providing legitimacy to users' experiential meso-reality. Here, we have a point of divergence, where grammatical modifications, for example in the online performance of self, attract strong criticism for not adhering to traditional concepts of the correct use of grammar inherent in the physical world. Hale (2017) argues that the use of internet language abbreviations such as 'lol' (laugh out loud) are becoming recognised as an official form, commonplace in online conversations. Returning to the research aim of this chapter, to ascertain whether the online performance of self is meaningful, the use of particular language is clearly a controversial point in perceiving authenticity in this regard.

A paradigm shift in the example of internet memes demonstrates just how far language, and its ability to convey meaning, has transformed. Internet memes combine images and text that are not exclusively produced by one person, but can be collectively created and continually modulated in a form that conveys a narrative to people online. Whilst critics of this new form of online language assert that it is essentially an ephemeral and transitory expression of human emotion that lacks

authenticity, Huntington (2013) argues that the internet meme conveys a level of linguistic nuance which is a deeply symbolic and pervasive mechanism of cognitive resonance. Embedded within visual rhetoric stylised by a unique enthymeme, the meme can be interpreted as somewhat ambiguous, often leading to strong criticism. Ultimately, this is the inherent state of this visually stylised type of symbolic language, but certainly does not mean we should dismiss it due to a lack of understanding or misinterpretation.This chapter has attempted to ascertain whether the performance of self online can be meaningful comparable to the physical-world self. Using Goffman's (1969) symbolic interactionist theory of dramaturgy, an analysis of social media, online gaming and the use of specific language indicates that the digital self is potentially perceived as 'truer' or more authentic online. We may, in fact, prefer to play out an idealised version of ourselves in the digital world via the proxy of an avatar or the platform of SNS, and Goffman's (1969) impression management helps us to understand the nuances of this. It would be impossible to cover every conceivable aspect of the digital milieu, but the areas examined above provide a sociological foothold in the abstractness of the online world, which we can relate back to the physical in the context of meaning. Elements of language and conversation have understandably changed, and undoubtedly will continue to do so, but it is clear that they are no less legitimate because of their difference from the physical world. The online environment of the macro allows us to facilitate our micro-level identity, and partake in meso level interactions, and we must attempt to understand this digital social construction of reality to bring this dissertation’s argument to a close, and potentially ascribe meaning.

Chapter Four: Our Digitised Social Reality

RQ3. Can meaning be assigned to digital social reality in the same way the physical? (Macro)

We have thus far considered how nuances of identity formation and performance of self manifest and play out within the digital world. Furthermore, evidence has been presented to argue that authenticity and a sense of relatable meaning can be ascribed at a subjective level, as well as an objective one, in the context of individual perceptions and social interactions. Both the micro and meso complexities of performative identity, much like in the physical world, need a macro realm or 'stage', as Goffman (1969) theorises it, to enact ourselves in. This final chapter aims to discuss the digital macro and assess if meaning can be truly assigned to this type of reality, as per the research aim. To do this, the traditional sociological theory outlined in Chapter One regarding the social construction of reality will be considered as a guideline, while taking into account that potentially some elements may not translate. Furthermore, links with the micro and meso aspects of this dissertation may combine in a trifecta of clarification and potential union of sociological thought surrounding the abstractness of the digital world.

More Real Than Real?

The macro level of digital reality consists of a multitude of facets, such as augmented, mixed, poly-social and virtual which can consist of several variations. These variations lie beyond the scope of this dissertation, which considers a core construct of social reality in which our performative selves play out. What exactly

constitutes the macro digitised experience we engage in through the proxies of our smart devices? Partly, the online digital world is a simulacrum of physical reality, recreating recognisable physical-world artefacts which evoke a symbolic frame of reference for individuals and groups alike. Scepticism of a navigational digital world that creates and maintains significant levels of authenticity is somewhat paradoxical when online snapshots of an individual's reality, which constitute primary definers of their identity, as mentioned in the introduction, are simultaneously questioned as to their credibility as an accurate representation of self (Tsatsou 2016). However, a level of ambiguity also surrounds the complexity of digital reality and how faithfully certain physical-world elements of human experience are conveyed in the digital world (Chayko 2017, Gibson and Carden 2018). This ambiguity, however, results from the premise that macro digital reality aims to replicate the physical world one-to-one, which is simply not the case. The online world replicates in part, but is also unique in itself, and continues to evolve with the normalisation of embedded intelligence, seamlessly integrated into our everyday lives (Guo et al 2011). In this sense, a dismissive rhetoric of the credence of the digital social world is combined with a level of virtual reality exceptionalism (Yadin 2017), each arguing its own claim to authenticity. A physical-world standpoint of tangible reality is easy to argue, simply because it feels real and thus perhaps extends a dismissive argument against the credence of the digital built purely on this sensate knowledge.

Based on the information presented in this dissertation, I believe, however, that this perspective is ultimately myopic and self-limiting, built from a deterministic perspective embedded largely in the material world, not necessarily intentional, but simply the status quo regarding the experience of reality prior to the inception of the internet. Our shared sense of digital reality in the form of externalisation is typified by

the macro-level world we choose to perform in with others in social settings, be it SNS, online gaming, or online dating, as discussed in Chapter Three. Participation in individual and shared activities in the digital formulates a milieu of reality that is not dissimilar to the physical world insofar that it is shaped and mediated by cultural and ideological patterns of people. However, the digital world differs in that this flow of influence can algorithmically shift itself away from relevance if programmed to do so and at a speed that the physical world cannot reflect (Ricci et al 2015). A key recognition here is that this new form of reality is currently removed from the tangible objective rule set that shapes our physical world. The digital is a subjective reality experience in an objective framework of reference, built partially as a simulacrum and created entirely from human innovation. Cultural values do derive from a shared inception point of physical reality, but have the potential to take on a multitude of meanings in the digital (Beer and Burrows 2013, Papacharissi 2010). As mentioned in Chapter One, in the physical world, we create and assign meaning to objective reality and the things we create through shared experience. When this is replicated with startling accuracy in a digital format, it can raise questions as to which is more 'real', to the point where a potential meshing of realities can be seen (Sakamoto et al 2012). However, ascribed meaning through functional utility starts to break down if we compare certain elements between these worlds of existence. For example, a water bottle in the physical world represents a medium of carrying a substance essential for the survival of life, warranting salience and shared understanding of its purpose, specifically its recognised functional utility (Gergen 2009). When this is replicated in the digital world, its functional meaning is lost due to its lack of tangibility, and it thus lacks its original utility and purpose. Our sensate experience of physical reality is built on perceptions and social interactions that take place through

the process of externalisation in social theory, and when this is applied to the digital world it can appear ambiguous in the context of meaning.

Shared Digital Reality

Elicitations of identity in shared physical reality, shaped by socially normative elements, are recreated in the digital which, through macro-level mediation, now has the ability to steer human behaviour. This might sound somewhat insidious but is regardless now becoming commonplace due to the increasing complexity of digital reality (Couldry and Hepp 2018). What is almost bizarre is the normalised conception of specific individual and social behaviours that, through objectification, have become collectively perceived as an agreed-upon status quo, given almost unquestionable legitimacy as a macro structural mediator of human performance. How might we position this mediated experiential reality in terms of a relatable point of analysis? The example of social networking sites (SNS), as discussed in the previous chapter, explicates the mechanisms of macro-level behaviour-shaping through algorithmic mediation (Seyfert and Roberge 2016). Wohn and Bowe (2014) provide a unique and relevant definition that can assist in understanding how the micro, meso and macro elements of reality are fundamentally interrelated. Wohn and Bowe (2014) propose 'crystallisation', a process whereby data within SNS is envisioned as molecules that form the individual's internalised experience of perceived authentic and meaningful social reality (micro). This is ultimately mediated by the platform of SNS algorithms, through which the molecules form and overlap with other users' divergent realities, determining commonalities where no prior association exists (meso). This ultimately forms an overarching shared reality that continuously updates and evolves in complexity relative to the micro and meso input (macro). Each SNS user perceives

their online self and interactions as a 'true reality' in the sense that it is relatively authentic pertaining to their ideological system and level of online community participation (Wohn and Bowe 2014). At the same time, there are undoubtedly SNS users who do not partake in a level of interactions that equates to the 'true reality' experience, potentially making this problematic to argue as an objective definition for mainstream digital social reality; rather, it is the subjective experience of the user and what they perceive in their own mind which becomes their own 'truth'.

SNS users who experience Wohn and Bowe's (2014) crystallization process develop a deeply internalised level of symbolic attachment to the digital macro world as believable and legitimate. The shared reality online, which can manifest itself in an echo chamber of social discourse, for example, allows for tendentious ideological concepts to be unpacked, de-constructed and analysed through the lens of 'objective truth' or 'true reality', at least from the perspective of the individual and the collective group which participates in the shared reality. This links back to the traditional philosophical and sociological concepts pertaining to the social construction of reality put forward by Berger and Luckmann (1991) in Chapter One, more specifically, objectification, institutionalisation, and language, which ultimately form the structural foundations for what we perceive as real in the individual and collective sense, and use to ascribe social meaning to an object or idea. The shared reality of the crystallization process which Wohn and Bowe (2014) argue for is socially experienced within the constantly connected lifestyle of the datafication era (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger 2013). Through routine habituation of the normative social concepts of participation online, for example, the common generalisation that everyone uses social media (Herhold 2018) is institutionalised as meaningful relative to the cultural milieu at the time. Moreover, the macro mediation of individuals’ micro

and meso digital experience is ultimately reinforced with cognitive resonance, as mentioned in Chapter Three, to the point where shared digital elicitation of self is perceived as a normalised function of everyday life in the context of SNS (Van Dijck 2013).

Part of the elicitation of self in this shared reality is language and, once again, it plays a salient role at the macro level, as the formation of specific social realities is built upon the mechanism of interaction. Individual perceptions of particular social narratives in digital reality, defined as similar to one another in the context of SNS, for example, are algorithmically drawn together as a predictive form of socially cohesive groups.

This process of homophily, as Wohn and Bowe (2014) term it, is the mechanism which selectively chooses the level of interactions between individuals who have no prior relationship, ultimately serving as a curator of the digital macro reality. This top-down mediation of bottom-up data input constructs a reality which is believable and authentic enough to an individual so as to be comparable with the physical world in terms of value. Is this enough to argue meaningfulness in the digital world comparable to our physical one? In this instance, yes. The subjective experience of shared objective reality online is ultimately born of human creation. Although algorithmic mediation can appear somewhat insidious as an almost hegemonic system of control, perhaps this is simply unavoidable in the construction of this digital macro reality. However, the theories regarding the social construction of reality examined in Chapter One can assist in substantiating meaning in the online world, and fulfilling the research aim of this chapter. We should consider more evidence to solidify the argument and provide perspicuity to the somewhat nebulous online world.

Micro, Meso and Macro, Unified

Whilst it is difficult to argue for the sociological concept of historicity in the context of digital reality, due to the relatively new existence of the internet and its sheer complexity, one area of digital experience has persisted for over twenty years (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al 2013) thus warranting sociological investigation due to its impact on the social landscape. As mentioned in the previous chapter, online gaming offers a wealth of social data to consider, as levels of interactions via the avatar projection of self in a nuanced environment, such as the MMORPG genre (Massively Multi-player Online Role Playing Game), are unlike anywhere else. Examining the digital social worlds that we play out our performances in, rather than the interactions between people, typifies and brings together traditional concepts pertaining to the social construction of reality, manifesting as a subjective perception of the micro and meso projection of self within the macro reality that individuals agree upon as an authentic and meaningful reality. Yee (2006) investigates the MMORPG reality and how players are motivated to form relationships through continuous social interactions that are shaped and mediated by the essential mechanics of the digital environment. Moreover, the perceived authenticity of the player's preferred experience of digital reality, via a macro-level value system that facilitates a sense of progression (not unlike physical-world social mobility), is internalised, as mentioned earlier, as a potentially 'true reality' (Billieux et al 2013, Cole and Griffiths 2007). Similarly, Adams (2005) argues that participation in MMORPGS allows a construction of reality that offers potentially anonymous projections of self, via an avatar which may not reflect the player's physical counterpart in any way. Crucially, the performance of self is contingent upon the environment it is played out in, effectively a macro level of mediation upon identity characteristics familiar from Cooley and

Goffman's work, mentioned in Chapter One. What is strikingly odd, however, is that although individuals who engage in the digital realities of MMORPGs consider it a more meaningful experience and a truer expression of self, the nuances of this environment can reflect the physical world at times, and at others, not at all (Malaby 2007).

A blurring of realities in this sense makes it problematic to pull apart the argument for what is objectively a more meaningful experience of subjective reality. As Adams (2005) argues, the digital environment presents a complex and nuanced shared reality with specific cultural elements that work to define social behaviour. Again, the macro mediating aspects of digital reality are visible through the medium of culture that shapes the micro and meso components. Perhaps we should consider the perceived believability of specific digital environments, such as MMORPGS and online gaming as a whole, and question if, in fact, a digital representation is authentic enough to be considered 'real'. Unfortunately, we run into a fundamentally philosophical question of human determinism pertaining to what exactly constitutes tangible reality. Moreover, the argument becomes ontological, a question of ascertaining whether objects exist, the potential relationships between them in ascribing meaning, and the value in human reality. This is important to consider, for if we are to argue that the digital online reality we project and perform in is, in fact, meaningful, we should attempt to provide some philosophical and ontological evidence for this. Brey (2014) considers how individuals perceive elements of the virtual online world as believable and authentic comparable to their physical counterparts. More specifically, he argues that computer constructions and mediations of digital reality are real insofar that they are representing a digital copy of the physical world (Brey 2014). Moreover, any specific element of the digital copy of

a physical-world environment is defined by the limitations of the digital world and not the physical one. In a sense, authenticity and meaningfulness come from the subjective experience of a digitally objective reality, created to represent itself and defined by its own rule-set, rather than a one-to-one physical copy. It is the believability of the digital environment that conveys a symbolic representation indicative of this macro-level reality to the individual, who recognises its value based on the embedded culture and shared experience relative to that constructed environment.

This can shift or modulate in terms of perceivable value, but one often persistent and ubiquitous commonality is currency within a structured economy. Once again, this provides an intersection between the physical and digital worlds, as money can be both abstract and physical in an instant; crypto currency is a useful example here, as it has multi-dimensional utility and no definitive centralisation. This is unique because crypto currency can be created within gaming worlds and used there, but also transferred into a material form of physical purchase in everyday life (Schneider 2013, Ron and Attias 2017). This new form of currency represents the virtual crossing into an undoubtedly tangible and meaningful extra-virtual state. It is thus important to consider that the digital constructions we choose to interact with, whether through SNS, online gaming, or crypto currency, are not static elements. They are constantly updated at software and hardware levels, and what once seemed highly advanced can be yesterday's technology relatively fast. Moreover, this element of the macro universe, that allows for micro and meso points of digital and physical interaction, has recently become synonymous with new-found wealth (Bishop 2017) and new definers of social capital that move beyond a traditional sociological framework of understanding. This example demonstrates clear points of

relation between the micro, meso and macro that work in a synergistic manner, facilitating tangible change in both realities. However, this macro dimension is built upon mathematical equations that predict and steer micro and meso, which we should be fully aware of and attempt to understand.

Algorithmic Mediation

This technology constructs and mediates the macro level of digital reality and is important to understand in moving towards a conception of what we consider 'real and meaningful'. What has been considered thus far demonstrates the level of social acceptance, integration and continued use of digital technology that facilitates an environment to perform in. The evidence presented has aimed to solidify the argument that authenticity and legitimacy are present in digital reality, and meaningful in line with the physical world. In regard to the mediation of macro reality, shaping via algorithmic determinism ultimately steers individual behaviour and collective cultural values (Milan 2015, Massanari 2017). Couldry and Hepp (2018) argue that through the datafication (reduction of everyday life to quantifiable elements) and digitalization of human interactions in shared realities, everyday life online is mediated via this new form of media. This top-down manipulation of digital communicative action, the fundamental interaction point of any society, is internalised by public perception as the normalisation of an unchangeable, concrete social milieu. We can perhaps suggest that Burger and Luckmann's (1991) assertion of reification, in the context of humans disregarding the authorship of this digital reality and thus considering it beyond change, is essentially a capitulation to the mediation of the macro, hypostasised through a social dialectic that derives its own origin of creation. This ultimately suggests that digital reality holds a credible level of meaning, with

similarities in the social construction of reality distinguishable between human perceptions of both digital and physical experience. Lazter and Just (2017) support this with their argument regarding algorithmic governance pertaining to the social construction of digital reality. They argue that the new form of mediated digital reality is algorithmically selective in its social and meta-narratives, through programming that determines the interplay of subjective online experiences via a tailored objective reality. To be clear, algorithmic mediation refers to computer-based programs that, through predictive mathematical equations, aim to selectively build and shape the online digital world. A simple example of this could be using a search engine to look for something of interest, through which a selection of relevant material is algorithmically determined and presented to the individual. At the micro and meso level, this is easy enough to comprehend, but at the macro level it is problematic to unravel the origin of this narrative, thus perhaps suggesting a questionable authenticity.

Couldry and Powell (2014) argue that algorithmic reality construction and meditation is founded upon the input of human user data which, as they stress, is largely in the form of social media activity. This results in a constant flow of datafication, building a feedback loop of mediated, constructed and shared digital reality that is subjectively and objectively meaningful in the micro, meso and macro states. The social construction of digital reality, from this perspective, is formed from user input and mediated algorithmically, with the experience of micro/meso and the subjective determinism of what is meaningful internalised from cultural origins located in the physical world. Meaning is built upon our shared experience of reality in the physical world, and with the digital, meaningfulness translates, but is ultimately controlled, in regard to its salience and relevance, by algorithmic mediation. While we cannot perceive this as a specific hegemony per se, we can recognise elements of top-down mediation, but in a conception of socially normative reality, to most users this is simply beyond their control, or even beyond comprehension (Couldry and Hepp 2018). Once again, this reinforces the earlier point about reification and the internalisation of acceptance regarding objective reality and, while the digital exists currently as an intangible form, this does not make any of its elements less meaningful. We have a new form of reality that, through algorithmic mediation, offers a plethora of social experiences and, of course, a wealth of knowledge but, at the same time, problematic levels of social segregation and collective ideological thought that is meaningful enough to influence individuals to enact physical-world manifestations of their belief systems (Svensson et al 2012). These echo chambers and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) further feed into social and meta-narratives that are authentic and legitimate and that can, of course, be detrimental at times, but perhaps also offer elements of interaction of far greater value than those that currently exist in the physical world (Nikolov et al 2015). Perhaps it is somewhat myopic to deconstruct and dismiss a meaningful subjective experience from a perspective of physical exceptionalism and materialistic determinism. Ultimately, the digital macro experience shapes the way we perceive what is valued and relevant at a given time, through algorithmic mediation. This is not to say that choices are necessarily made for us in this context, but rather the selection we perceive is presented through that mediation, which we socially construct as meaningful.

Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed to determine if meaningfulness can be ascribed to identity formation (micro), performative self (meso) and social reality (macro), by considering the nuances of the digital world through traditional social theory, with consideration given to the twenty-first century. When examining the micro in Chapter Two, commonalities were found between Cooley's theory of identity formation and the digital quantified self. A separation between the qualitative and quantitative data which forms our online identity was presented to demonstrate the drive to reduce the

complexities of characteristics to predictive algorithmic code derived from data exhaust we create by being online. This suggests a lack of agency regarding identity formation, but even more important to consider is the way we perceive the legitimacy and potential authenticity of digital identity as a representative construct comparable to our physical self. Linking traditional social theory, albeit with suitable modifications, such as the work of Cooley and Barthes, with contemporaneous research efforts reveals the underlying mechanics of digital identity formation. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the dominance of technology has facilitated the constant collection of human sensate data through surveillance, but also through self-tracking, which provides substantive data to which people ascribe meaningfulness, as a representation of their perceivable digitised self, thus providing a transverse step between the physical and digital worlds.

The performative self (meso) discussed in Chapter Three considered how the digital identities we create perform within social environments, such as online gaming, SNS and online dating. The level of credence placed into these avatars was conveyed from existing research, which argued that people found a sense of 'true reality' or a preferred sense of elicited identity which, to the individual, was more authentic than their physical-world self. However, this is not without its problems, for example in the context of online dating, where people manage a projection of their idealised self in relation to finding a partner of perceived idealised form. What is fundamentally problematic here is that the idealised form is built on a malleable hyper-reality indicative of the digital technologies we use to present and perform ourselves. This is also reflected in SNS, whereby people engage in online social discourse which, in the physical world, they would not normally partake in, thus raising the question of the authenticity of digital representations of self in comparison to the physical world.

This, then, brings us back to the examples conveyed in the introduction regarding elicitations of self online via social media, such as Twitter or Facebook, and the question of what level of comparable authenticity they truly represent to who we are in the physical world. Subjectively user experience will perhaps always steer towards authenticity of self, relative to the situation and at the same time, objectively we can assess the credibility of this. What is problematic is the objective primacy of constructed identity which can potentially supersede the subjective notion of self, which was stated in the introduction. Online gaming presents a unique insight into the performative self, as it offers a deeply interactive playground of expression that the physical world simply cannot replicate. Although there are commonalities with the nuances of the physical world, the research conducted on MMORPGs, for example, has demonstrated that gender expression can be facilitated more freely and authentically, with individuals once again stating that this allowed for a 'truer' sense of performed self. By considering the symbolic interactionist work of Goffman, we can seek to provide a framework to interpret and provide sociological understanding of this new form of identity performance with, of course, suitable modifications. It is difficult to refute this paradigm shift in human experiential reality, and with the change in language used online to convey multidimensional meanings, especially in the example of memes that, in part, shape narratives within physical and digital social realities, one cannot deny how influential and relevant the online world has become.

Chapter Four considered the digitised social reality (macro) in order to link together the previous elements of micro and meso which, whilst fundamentally salient to examine individually, ultimately work in a synergistic manner to facilitate the online world. At various levels of integration, we encounter recreations of the physical world

and, at the same time, fundamentally divergent points of fantastical reality. What occurs within these, regardless, is the formation of online communities into which people place meaningfulness, as though they had tangibility and discernible value. It is important not to dismiss the subjective experience of individual and shared reality because it exists outside of what is considered a normative construct of objective authenticity. Berger and Luckmann demonstrated through their theory of socially constructed reality how people conceptualise meaning to what is experienced through sensate input. In the online world, the perception of what we constitute as sensate is still in a state of flux, constantly evolving, with levels of virtual reality providing immersion that may eventually result in our questioning what exactly is real. The flow of the online world is also salient to consider, with the notion of algorithmic mediation shaping the overarching cultural narratives of the world, to such an extent that it can facilitate change in the physical world. Ultimately, what we have when considering the micro, meso and macro elements is a paradigm shift in how we perceive ourselves, others and the world around us. Thus, as a science, sociology should aim to maintain a cadence of empirical research to build a framework of objective analysis in order to understand and provide credence to the subjective experience of social reality.

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