

# THE E-SELF: AM I STILL ME?

THE INFLUENCE OF THE INTERNET ON IDENTITIES

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# Abstract

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This thesis focuses on the question: “How does the internet negatively influence our identity?” The relevance of this question lies in the fact that internet is playing an increasingly important role in many people’s lives, and will only continue to increase in the future. The fact that this is happening merits research into the area of the impact this internet usage has on people’s daily lives. This thesis uses Google, Facebook and dating websites as examples of influence both negative and positive. The ultimate focus, however, is on the negative influences. Using Alan Gewirth’s theory of agency as criteria for what it means to be negatively influenced, it is established that negative influence of the internet is wrong and should be prevented. This prevention can best be supported by creating a heightened awareness to how the internet influences its users. The fact that the internet has the ability to influence people negatively means that especially in the future people need to take extra care not to become too dependent on the internet.

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# 1. Introduction

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Oscar Wilde once said: “Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”<sup>1</sup> He refers to the way our identities are influenced by our surroundings every single moment of every single day. Most of the time people do not think about exactly what makes them the way that they are, and that is okay. What is not okay, however, is when identities are being influenced in such a way that the ideas we have about certain people or even ourselves, are no longer true.

The context in which I will be using the concept of identity for this thesis is the internet. In our day and age the internet has become increasingly important. Where there were 361 million internet users in 2000, there were already 1967 million in 2010, which represents a 500 % growth over 10 years.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays it is hard to imagine a world without internet. Not only has the internet become invaluable when it comes to staying in touch through e-mail, chat, and social network services, but also companies have ingrained the internet in their daily workings. The number of things we can do with the internet is now almost unlimited. We use it to order food, to shop, to look things up, to entertain ourselves, and most important to this thesis; we use the internet to represent ourselves. Representing ourselves though the internet involves all the things we choose to publicize online, from screen name to avatar to profile page. In a world in which online representations are increasingly often used to form an opinion of someone, the misrepresentation of identities can be crucial. For example when a room in a student home opens up, the people who apply to come live there are often ‘screened’ using Facebook. Even companies will sometimes screen job applicants by ‘Googling’ them or looking them up on Facebook. In these instances an opinion of people is created without having interacted with them ‘normally’ at all. Another important issue is the way in which the absence of distinction between social circles on social network sites like Facebook puts users in the position of having to address family, friends and co-workers all at the same time. This thesis explains how this may influence identity. The focus of this thesis will be on the negative influences of the internet on our identity. The research question reads:

*How does the internet negatively influence our identity?*

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (New York: 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Pingom.com, *The Incredible Growth of the Internet Since 2000* (22 October 2010).

Considering the importance of the concept of identity for this thesis, the first chapter is dedicated solely to defining a working definition identity. In the following chapter examples of both negative and positive influence on online identity are displayed using Google, Facebook and dating websites. Finally, chapter 4 considers the negative influence displayed in the previous chapter more thoroughly, and explains why it is important for an agent that identity remains free of negative influence. The theory of agency by Alan Gewirth is used to establish why some influences of the internet can be considered negative. This chapter also speculates about possible ways in which to prevent negative internet influence. The conclusion in chapter 5 combines all chapters and reflects on what this thesis set out to achieve and what the findings conclude.

## 2. Identity: A Problematic Concept

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In order to look more closely at whether the internet has any negative influence on the forming of our identity, it is paramount that we have a good idea of what exactly identity is, how it is formed, what exactly constitutes an online identity, and how this differs from a 'normal' identity. In this chapter I will briefly introduce the philosophical discussion surrounding the concept of identity, and discuss the meaning of online identity and a 'normal' identity.

The definition of the word identity found in the Cambridge Online Dictionary reads: "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group which make them different from others."<sup>3</sup> This corresponds with the normal reactions we get when we discuss someone's identity. We think about who a person is, and what about this person makes him who he is. This idea of identity often used in the social sciences centers on self-conception and the features a person possesses that makes him or her unique. The philosophical concept of identity also contains many other views besides the identity of a person. In most philosophical discussions identity has to do with the relation a thing bears to itself. Identity in philosophy often concerns this relation and gives rise to problems such as if  $x$  and  $y$  share the same properties, does this mean they are identical? The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy gives a good indication of exactly what the current discussion on identity looks like, and which different views are represented. Due to the variety of ideas behind the philosophical concept of identity, many views will not be of any help to this thesis. However, in order to get an idea about the philosophical discussion regarding the concept I will briefly state a few, and see if there are any that might be helpful to this thesis. The notion of *Criteria of Identity* is the idea of a standard by which identity can be judged. This idea was introduced by Gottlob Frege in 1950 and was also supported by Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1958. It has to do with the problem that the philosophical notion of identity is not unitary, but rather identity is always about the relation held between two things, be this lines, objects, or people. Exactly how the criterion should be implemented and even the very applicability of the idea remain under discussion. Another notion is *Vague Identity* which considers the possibility that when  $a$  is only vaguely identical with  $b$ , there is some part of  $b$  that that is not identical with  $a$  and thus it is not identical with  $b$  at all. It appears to follow that "such vagueness is only possible when one or both of the terms flanking the sign of identity is an imprecise designator."<sup>4</sup> The conclusion drawn is that identity must be a determinate relation. However, this is where other philosophers present examples that this conclusion is too sweeping, and that even statements about identity that do contain precise designators may be indeterminate.

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<sup>3</sup> Cambridge Dictionaries Online 9 June 2012.

<sup>4</sup> The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2009) 4 June 2012.

Discussions like the two mentioned above do not appear to be relevant to this thesis and will therefore be left out of the equation. However, the following views might prove helpful. Like the notion of *Identity over Time*. Whereas with the criteria of identity events are looked at synchronically, identity over time is observed diachronically. The very notion of identity over time can already be considered controversial because time means change, and whether identity can remain the same over time is one of the notions not yet resolved. The main question surrounding this subject reads: “How [do we] characterize identity through time and across change given that there is such a thing.”<sup>5</sup> A big point of discussion within this debate concerns the issue of *perdurantism* versus *endurantism*. In this discussion perdurance represents the idea that an individual has temporal parts throughout its existence (meaning we go through different stages in our lives), whereas endurance represents the idea that a person is wholly present at every single moment of his or her existence. Since I will be looking at the influence of the internet on our identity, it seems that the idea of identity over time will also play a role because any influence the internet might have on our identity also happens over time, and past experiences seem to play a big role in the creation of the identity of a person.

Another discussion about identity that might be relevant is the one about *Identity Across Possible Worlds*. This idea considers the way in which someone might say of someone else “Joe might have been a dentist”. In this view it is asserted that it is possible for Joe to have been a dentist in an identical world. Saying “Joe could never have been a dentist” implies that in no identical world does any individual identical to Joe become a dentist. What makes this idea problematic is the idea of identical things in identical worlds which are not 100 % identical at all. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy uses the example of a bicycle that, in an identical world, is made of some other material. Is this then still a bicycle? And how much does a bicycle have to change in order for it to not be a bicycle anymore? The problem, then, is whether we accept the possibility of different parts still making up the same individual, or whether we reject this notion and thus the idea of identity across possible worlds. Although the internet is not the same as a parallel universe, the virtual world does offer a platform with which some comparisons can be drawn. In this way this possibility of identity across worlds may prove to be relevant to this discussion.

There are some other philosophical discussions surrounding the identity concept, like *Contingent Identity* and *Relative Identity* but although no doubt very interesting, this paper will not enter into those discussions because like the *criteria of identity* and *vague identity* views they are not relevant to this thesis. The focus of this thesis lies mainly with the issue of identity forming, and many of the discussions mentioned do not offer any helpful insights into this matter, so besides from identity

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<sup>5</sup> [The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) (2009) 4 June 2012.

over time and identity across possible worlds I will leave out the philosophical discussions concerning the other notions of identity.

### 2.1: 'Normal' Identity

Most every person has some idea about what 'identity' means. The word is often used in common discourse, and thus it is remarkable to note that the exact definition of identity still remains difficult to grasp. In 1983 Philip Gleason observed; "The meaning of 'identity' as we currently use it is not well captured by dictionary definitions, which reflect older senses of the word. Our present idea of 'identity' is a fairly recent social construct, and a rather complicated one at that. Even though everyone knows how to use the word properly in everyday discourse, it proves quite difficult to give a short and adequate summary statement that captures the range of its present meanings."<sup>6</sup> James D. Fearon embarks on an attempt to distill the meaning of identity in his paper titled "What is Identity (as we now use the word)?" Here he argues that "'identity' is presently used in two linked senses, which may be termed 'social' and 'personal.' In the former sense, an 'identity' refers simply to a *social category*, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes. In the second sense of personal identity, an identity is some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable."<sup>7</sup> I like the idea of the social versus the personal identity, because what you do as a person may give some indication as to your identity as well as features you possess. However, I am not convinced that the characteristics of a personal identity are unchangeable, or that it is something a person takes special pride in. For example I might be very shy and even though this is a characteristic of me that makes me who I am, I do not take pride in it. Perhaps my shyness will go away in time and this would indicate that the characteristics that define me are changeable.

In his paper Fearon notes that he went to look for definitions of identity by other scholars in order to clarify the concept. This is what he found:

- ❏ Identity is "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others"(Hogg and Abrams 1988, 2).
- ❏ "Identity is used in this book to describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture"(Deng 1995, 1).

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Gleason, Identifying Identity: A Semantic History (Journal of American History 6) 910-931.

<sup>7</sup> James D. Fearon, What is Identity (as we now use the word)? (Stanford University: 1999) 2.



- ❑ Identity “refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities” (Jenkins 1996, 4).
- ❑ “National identity describes that condition in which a mass of people have made the same identification with national symbols – have internalized the symbols of the nation ...” (Bloom 1990, 52).
- ❑ Identities are “relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self” (Wendt 1992, 397).
- ❑ “Social identities are sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object. ... [Social identities are] at once cognitive schemas that enable an actor to determine ‘who I am/we are’ in a situation and positions in a social role structure of shared understandings and expectations” (Wendt 1994, 395).
- ❑ “By social identity, I mean the desire for group distinction, dignity, and place within historically specific discourses (or frames of understanding) about the character, structure, and boundaries of the polity and the economy” (Herrigel 1993, 371).
- ❑ “The term [identity] (by convention) references mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other” (Katzenstein 1996, 59).
- ❑ “Identities are ... prescriptive representations of political actors themselves and of their relationships to each other”(Kowert and Legro 1996, 453).
- ❑ “My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose” (Taylor 1989, 27).
- ❑ “Yet what if identity is conceived not as a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject?” (Clifford 1988, 344).
- ❑ “Identity is any source of action not explicable from biophysical regularities, and to which observers can attribute meaning” (White 1992, 6).
- ❑ “Indeed, identity is objectively defined as location in a certain world and can be subjectively appropriated only *along with* that world ... [A] coherent identity incorporates within itself all the various internalized roles and attitudes.” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 132).
- ❑ “Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space, or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses. ... [Until recently, we have incorrectly thought that identity is] a kind of fixed point of thought and being, a ground of action ... the logic of something like a ‘true self.’ ... [But] Identity is a process, identity is split, Identity is not a fixed

point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself” (Hall 1989).<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to see the diversity in the definitions listed above. This is most likely due to different uses the authors had for the concept in the literature they set out to write. However, what is most important to this thesis is not how the definitions differ, but how they coincide. This will help in acquiring a working definition of identity for this thesis. There seem to be some elements that reoccur in almost every listing. For example what we see repeated many times is the relation of a person to the world around him. Some may call it a relation to the world, while others call it the relation to groups, and one simply mentions the idea of observers. Yet they all boil down to the same idea: the relation of a person to his surroundings, in whichever way this can be interpreted. Another idea that seems salient to the concept of identity is the idea we have about ourselves as persons. This again is expressed in different ways such as expectations we have of ourselves, conceptions we have of ourselves and Katzenstein even clearly states identity exists of images we have of ourselves and others. The distinction between the self and the other also appears to be what Fearon means when he talks about the social and the personal category. In this thesis I will use a wide definition of identity that nevertheless has much to do with what was discovered here. Identity as used in this thesis henceforth exists in the conceptions humans have of themselves, and in interaction with the relations we have with the world around us.

## *2.2: Online Identity*

Especially the idea of an online identity is very important to this thesis. In order to see how and if our online identity is shaped by the internet, we first need to develop an understanding of the concept.

An online identity is basically everything that is visible about you on the worldwide web. This includes e-mail, social network sites, but also memberships at forums, online magazines, online games, online clothing shops and any other site you ever signed up for or posted a message at, everything from small avatar photographs to the casual broadcasting of what music you are currently listening to adds up to your identity on the internet. However, the definition of ‘normal’ identity can also apply here, because even though others are only able to see the things you broadcasted and published on the internet, this does not mean that we do not have conceptions of our online identities ourselves. This becomes very clear when we look at the selective way we choose for example what display picture to use in Facebook, and even the way we write messages and e-mails, adding smileys to make us seem more friendly or fun. It seems we are very much aware of the identity or image we are displaying via the internet. In a way it can be said that an online identity

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<sup>8</sup> James D. Fearon, [What is Identity \(as we now use the word\)?](#) (Stanford University: 1999) 4.

does not differ much from a normal identity at all, besides from the fact that all interaction takes place in a virtual world. Where in real life your outward appearance and interaction with people might help form your identity, in the virtual world this is replaced with pictures and written messages.

In the anthology “A Networked Self” edited by Zizi Papacharissi he compiled a number of discussions about what it means to present the self in online networked environment. When a person is online, they are usually not visible to the people on the internet they are in contact with. Most of the communication on the internet happens through text. This is a major difference to real-life interaction as people are not able to see the body language or hear the intonation with which something is said. Like in real life, people on the internet seek to establish their identity. Social network sites cater to this need. They allow a user to set up a personalized page that best reflects the way users portray their own identities. On social network sites people usually befriend people they know in real life. Through the use of photos, texts, movies, and other multimedia, users try to establish and preserve their ‘real’ identities on the internet. The use of friends in this sense can be seen as mutual identity authenticators, because you are basically using them to establish the truth about who you are. The process of self-preservation on the internet can become quite complex as users strive to make their personalized platforms available for a variety of audiences, depending on their relationship with the person visiting the page. As Papacharissi states: “The individual must [...] engage in multiple mini performances that combine a variety of semiological references so as to produce a presentation of the self that makes sense to multiple audiences, without sacrificing coherence and continuity.”<sup>9</sup> I believe that what Papacharissi means in this sentence is the fact that in different areas of the internet people have to act differently. For example if you are a youth joining a chat room, you will most likely put on a different ‘performance’ than when you are on the forum of your church. The combining of ‘a variety of semiological references’ (where semiological refers to the signs we use while communicating) can be explained as follows. Imagine you have gathered most of your friends on a social network site, but your mother and your grandmother are also connected to you through this platform and can read all messages you post. In this situation the person will have to ‘mix’ their persona as a good daughter and granddaughter with the idea of a cool friend, so that grandma, mom, and friends consider your communications in a favorable way. A risk that the social network platform brings with it is the way in which boundaries between private and public seem to blur to a large extent, some people have over a thousand friends on their social network, and this means that any personal information they share will also be observed by a large amount of people they do not know very well at all. In this way information may be accidentally exposed to a larger

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<sup>9</sup> Zizi Papacharissi ed, *Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (New York: Routledge, 2011) 307.

audience than intended. As we have seen from Papachrissi's example another prominent problem can be the way in which different private spheres merge, requiring people to tailor their messages to a variety of audiences, something that seldom occurs in real life.

What makes the notion of identity on the internet even more interesting are the encounters with strangers. Although many friends on social networks may also be people known in real life, this does not always have to be the case. People are always meeting new people online. This occurs on forums, online chat rooms, as well as gaming platforms. The person interacting with you does not know you in any other way than the way you present yourself. It is in such instances people may conceive your identity differently than what you were trying to portray. Since an online identity can be said to contain any and all information you choose to share about yourself in the public realm that is the internet, or within the slightly more private sphere of your social network service, it is still quite easy to approach some platform of the internet pretending to be someone else. For example, when entering a chat room you might present yourself as older or younger, as a member of the opposite sex, or even as from a different country. Most people are aware that this is the case and this has led to everyone taking what is being said in public chat rooms a lot less serious. However, there are of course the dangers of people who create whole social network accounts with fake pictures and fake information, and this can sometimes make it really hard to discern the fake from the real. The reason I mention this is to stress how easy it is to alter your identity on the internet, and although most people will not go as far as creating a fake social network account, it is remarkably easy to boast some minor details about yourself, or neglect to mention others. This form of altering your identity on the internet slightly is, however, voluntary and self-instigated. Now imagine that the identity or image you are trying to convey on the internet is altered not by you, but by other media and marketing tools floating around on the internet. This problem along with issues of voluntary misrepresentation and misconceptions people may have of themselves due to the internet is what this thesis will discuss. The ultimate idea of this thesis is that your online identity should be able to match the identity you wish to convey, because involuntary influence can put pressure on identities, leading to misrepresentations. In order for people to flourish online as well as in real life such interference should be removed.

### *2.3 Why is identity important?*

The concept of identity plays a huge role in this thesis. Therefore it is crucial to present some evidence as to why identity is even worth our consideration. Christine Korsgaard explains this very well saying; "I also believe it is essential to the concept of agency that an agent be unified. That is to say: to regard some movement of my mind or my body as *my action*, I must see it as an expression of

my self as a whole, rather than as a product of some force that is at work *on* me or *in* me. Movements that result from forces working *on* me or *in* me constitute things that happen to me. [...] For a movement to be my action, for it to be expressive of *myself* in the way that an action must be, it must result from my entire nature working as an integrated whole.”<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that she uses the words ‘movement of *mind* or *body*’ because movements of the mind play a substantial role in this thesis. Korsgaard explains that the ability to consider actions of both the mind and body as my own, it has to result from the person as a whole, free of outside influence. Without this freedom the agent will not be unified, and a person can be said to act or think the way that he does not through his own volition, but through outside forces working on or in him. This can be considered wrong because as Korsgaard states; “Movements that result from forces working *on* me or *in* me constitute things that happen to me.”<sup>11</sup> This action of mind or body could then be said not to be an action of the agent at all.

Finally it is also crucial to point out that although online and ‘normal’ identity are described separately in this chapter, this does not mean that they are two different things. Both the online and the ‘normal’ aspect of identity belong to the whole that makes up our identity. Even when we present ourselves as a different person on the internet, the mere fact of doing so says something about our identity. Every which way we choose to present ourselves reflects back on us, and no one else. Therefore every aspect of our lives put together forms the complex whole that is our identity. This also explains why influences on our online identities influence not only the online part of a person’s identity, but this person’s identity as whole. Any problematic influence can therefore be a problem for a person as a whole. Chapter 4 will go more thoroughly into why negative influence on our identities should be avoided and what consequences this influence may have on us as persons.

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<sup>10</sup> Christine M Korsgaard. Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity (Oxford: University Press, 2009) 18-19.

<sup>11</sup> Christine M Korsgaard. Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity (Oxford: University Press, 2009) 18.

# 3. The Influence of the Internet on our Identity

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In this chapter I will discuss the influence of the internet on our online identity. In order to do so I will briefly go back into how our identity on the internet is formed. I will then discuss the concept of persuasive technology as this plays a potentially large role in influencing our online identities. Then I will present some examples of ways in which the internet influences us.

## *3.1: What Forms Our Online Identity?*

As discussed in chapter 2, our online identity exists of everything about us that is publicized on the internet. Someone may look at my social network site and based on the content of that site form an opinion about my identity, or someone may Google my name and find that I have registered for several websites about different topics and create an opinion based on that information. Also if I add someone I met online to Skype this person might construct my identity based on what I say and which avatar photograph I am displaying, or what screen name I am using. For a large part my online identity consists of what I choose to display myself as on the internet, and these displays may differ in different areas of the internet. An online identity consists of all these things put together.

## *3.2: Persuasive Technology on the Internet*

In order to see how our online identity is influenced by the internet I would like to discuss the concept of persuasive technology because this phenomenon plays a big role in getting people to do things on the internet that they might not have set out to do. In this way it can also associate us with things we might not want to be associated with.

Persuasive technology is technology designed to change attitudes or behaviors of people through persuasion and social influence. It is a phenomenon widely used in marketing, politics, management, and other areas. It can be used in a human-to-human setting but also in human-to-computer interaction. In his book *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do* Ph. D. B.J. Fogg presents some very clear examples of persuasive technology involving computers;

*“An advertising agency creates a Web site that lets children play games online with virtual characters. To progress, kids must answer questions such as, ‘What is your favorite TVshow?’*

*and ‘How many bathrooms are in your house?’ Kids provide these answers quickly in their quest to continue playing.”<sup>12</sup>*

*“Julie has been growing her retirement fund for almost 20 years. To optimize her investment strategy, she signs up for a Web-based service that reportedly can give her individualized expert advice. Using dramatic visual simulations and citing expert opinion, the system persuades Julie to invest more in the stock market and strongly recommends a particular stock. Two months later, the stock drops dramatically and Julie loses much of her hard-earned retirement money. Although the system has information about risk, the information isn't prominently displayed. Nor is the fact that the site is operated by a company with a major financial investment in the company issuing the stock.”<sup>13</sup>*

*“Kim's portable device helps her choose affordable products made by companies with good environmental records. In advising Kim on buying a new printer, the system suggests a more expensive product than she wanted. It shows how the company has a much better environmental record. Kim buys the recommended printer. The system fails to point out that the printer she bought will probably break down more often.”<sup>14</sup>*

Although the abovementioned examples are all negative, persuasive technology can also be a very useful tool in acquiring positive results. A good example of these positive uses for persuasive technology is the Stanford Persuasive Tech Lab. “The purpose of the Persuasive Technology Lab is to create insight into how computing products—from websites to mobile phone software—can be designed to change people’s beliefs and behaviors. Our major projects include technology for creating health habits, mobile persuasion, and the psychology of Facebook.”<sup>15</sup> They research for example the possibilities of how mobile devices can be used to improve people’s health using persuasive technology, and on how technology and social behaviors and insights can promote new paths towards global peace.

The internet is littered with persuasive technology and the fact that the internet is interchangeable only enhances its application. This has to do with the fact that the internet exists of code, and this code is written in such a way that it registers what we do online and tries to anticipate

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<sup>12</sup> B.J. Fogg, Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2003) 211.

<sup>13</sup> B.J. Fogg, Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2003) 211.

<sup>14</sup> B.J. Fogg, Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2003) 211.

<sup>15</sup> Stanford Persuasive Tech Lab, (2012) <<http://captology.stanford.edu/about>>.

our path. The internet interface itself was at some point designed by people, and whether these people were aware of it or not, in a way they determined how we would be able to access the internet. However, the way the internet has evolved is mainly due to the people themselves. If we would question why we have the options we have, we would find that this is mostly our doing. To make the internet as useful as possible programmers have created algorithms that cater to our needs. For example if many people use a search engine to search for a particular subject, this subject will appear at the top of the list. In this way the internet contains many self-learning programs. Most of these features were implemented to help us use the internet more effectively, and it can be said to be quite ironic that these same algorithms that are supposed to help us are now doing their jobs a little too well, directing us to much sought after information when we might be looking for something uncommon which proves to be much harder to find.

There is also much deliberative persuasive technology on the internet. This mostly happens through visual advertisements and alluring promises on countless websites. The tricky thing here is that the advertisements can be catered to you personally, making them even more attractive. For example if you have just visited an online shoe store and clicked on some shoes you liked, you might find on a completely different page those same shoes you clicked displayed in the advertisement.

The abundance of persuasive technology on the internet is not necessarily bad, and it can even be quite helpful at times. However, as Fogg states; “[p]eople may be unaware of the ways in which interactive computer technology can be designed to influence them, and they may not know how to identify or respond to persuasion tactics applied by the technology.”<sup>16</sup> There is also some discussion surrounding the ethics of persuasive technology, but I will not go into this here. Persuasive technology is only relevant to this thesis due to its influence on identity forming on the internet. Since an internet identity consists of everything a person does on the internet, the fact that many of these actions are influenced through the use of persuasive technology proves that this is certainly a subject relevant to this thesis.

### *3.4: Examples of Influence*

#### **3.4.1: Google**

For the first example of influence I chose Google, because Google is a worldwide famous search engine that has expanded to many other platforms and continues to grow. You will be hard pressed to find an individual that has not at least heard of Google. Even the word ‘to google’ has already become a known verb in common discourse. Google will serve as a good example because millions of users use it every day and thus any influence by Google will have a great impact.

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<sup>16</sup> B.J. Fogg, *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do* (San Fransisco: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2003) 214.



Google was founded by Larry Page and Sergey Brin while they were attending Stanford University together. It was incorporated as a privately held company on September 4, 1998. Their mission statement read: “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful”. Over the years Google has expanded from its core, the search engine, to other software like e-mail, social networking (Google+), instant messaging, they developed a browser (Google Chrome) and Google also leads the development of the Android mobile operating system. Google runs more than one million servers in data centers all over the world and processes over one billion search requests. One of the main reasons Google became so successful is because they insisted on keeping their main search website (www.google.com) as empty as possible and thus free of advertising. They claimed that websites financed by advertisements would favor the companies supplying the ads. This is why word of mouth publicity was extremely important to Google especially in the beginning. Not being influenced by anybody was a goal for Google, their unofficial slogan became “Don’t be evil”<sup>17</sup>, because for Google the sincerity of their product was worth more than money. However, it seems that in trying to help the consumers as much as possible, Google may find their goodwill backfire.

Whenever we use Google or any of its daughter products, Google registers what we do. Every search assignment we feed into the machine is noted, along with which links you click following your search. This can be very helpful at times, because sometimes we do not know what we are looking for until Google suggests it to us. Recently the Rathenau Institute published a book titled “Voorgeprogrammeerd: Hoe internet ons leven leidt” (Pre-programmed: How the internet directs our lives<sup>18</sup>). This book explores the ways in which the internet tries to steer us in certain directions. Some of the subjects discussed in this book are also relevant to this thesis. For example in the chapter concerning Google they note that “the amount of websites where Google ‘spies’ on you, is mostly already 80% of all sites visited.”<sup>19</sup> This seems quite extreme. Also they state that

*“If you’re not paying anything, you are the product. Your surf- and search data are Google’s real target. The more you Google or use G-mail or YouTube, the more Google finds out about the device you are using for browsing. And when you are browsing on a personal device such as a smartphone, or when you are browsing after you have logged in to Google, Google has the opportunity to collect information up to a very individual level.”<sup>20</sup>*

Needless to say Google possesses a goldmine of detailed browsing information from millions of people around the world, and although Google could exploit this knowledge in countless ways, they are not nearly utilizing this as much as they could. To give an example of the incredible power of such

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<sup>17</sup> [Google.com](http://www.google.com/about/company/philosophy/), 9 June 2012 <http://www.google.com/about/company/philosophy/>.

<sup>18</sup> Translation by Rianne van der Heijden

<sup>19</sup> Christian van t’ Hof, Jelte Timmer and Rinie van Est, *Voorgeprogrammeerd [Pre-programmed]* (Den Haag: Boom Lemma Uitgevers, 2012) 41.

<sup>20</sup> Christian van t’ Hof, Jelte Timmer and Rinie van Est, *Voorgeprogrammeerd [Pre-programmed]* (Den Haag: Boom Lemma Uitgevers, 2012) 41.

immense amounts of data, 'Google, using Google trends, was able to accurately show the course of a flu epidemic, and also accurately predicted best soccer players and talent show winners using the search-behavior of millions of people.'<sup>21</sup>

Now that we know what information Google collects, let us look at what they are doing with said information. On the official Google website you can find their privacy policy in which they explain exactly what they do with the information gathered. For example they state that "[we]e use the information we collect from all of our services to provide, maintain, protect and improve them, to develop new ones, and to protect Google and our users."<sup>22</sup> As well as many other positive things such as "[w]e use information collected from cookies and other technologies, like pixel tags, to improve your user experience and the overall quality of our services."<sup>23</sup> However, a feature of Google that could create problems is this: "We also use this information to offer you tailored content – like giving you more relevant search results and ads."<sup>24</sup> Although this may seem like a positive feature, as Google no doubt intended it to be, this could still prove problematic because most people believe that when they search something with Google they are searching objectively, while this is obviously not the case. This means that when I am searching for a particular subject I might get completely different results than someone else. Google promotes this by calling it 'tailored content' but the problem with this feature is that people do not realize their search results are personalized, and when they use their personalized search results to draw conclusions, this can lead to serious problems. This can also have bad influences on our identities. An example as presented in *Pre-programmed*: a person who was a tour guide in his daily life was surprised and somewhat disappointed to find out that his website about hiking in Tibet, though always among the first search results in his browser at home, did not show up in the search results on another pc at all. For *Pre-programmed* many people were interviewed about Google, and none of them knew that their search results were being personalized to such a great extent. For people to develop their identities they should not be hindered or biased in any way. This goes for online identities as well as offline, as the two are always interrelated. The way in which we are steered towards what an algorithm has deducted we need limits the scope of what is really out there. For example, scholars who are often writing papers on subjects of the same discipline might, when they use Google, often be directed to websites based on their browsing history which is no doubt full of websites about their subject. In this way the 'new' areas discovered by the scholar will be mapped out due to the subject of his studies, and this prevents him from stumbling upon information that might help him think outside of

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<sup>21</sup> Christian van t' Hof, Jelte Timmer and Rinie van Est, *Voorgeprogrammeerd [Pre-programmed]* (Den Haag: Boom Lemma Uitgevers, 2012) 42.

<sup>22</sup> Google.com, 9 June 2012. <<http://www.google.com/policies/privacy/>>

<sup>23</sup> Google.com, 9 June 2012. <<http://www.google.com/policies/privacy/>>

<sup>24</sup> Google.com, 9 June 2012. <<http://www.google.com/policies/privacy/>>

the box. For identity this means that people might have certain feelings about the importance of information, as their Google search results confirm that their subject/website/interests are important in some way because they are listed first. This can lead to a false sense of self-confirmation. Someone might feel quite important knowing his page is the first to be listed when searching for a specific term. They may even derive a sense of confidence from this, not knowing it is based on Google's inner workings. Ultimately Google is supplying users with a false sense of what's important and what is relevant, and since our identities consist of the image we have of ourselves and the interactive relations with the world around us, Google offers us a false image of ourselves (the Tibet tour guide website was not as 'important' as he thought it was) and a misplaced view of the world around us (since we would only ever find things Google 'thought' we were looking for). Google, however, also has many positive influences. For example when we are writing an e-mail it may suggest people to whom you might also want to send the mail, based on contacts you have had in the past. Features like this can be very helpful and also have a positive influence on our identities as we sustain relationships with people we might not have otherwise thought to include in the e-mail. In an article by Harry McCracken titled "A Google, Google, Google, Google World" he also notes that the amount of information Google has on us can be quite worrisome. "You don't need to be a privacy nut to worry about the implications of this detailed paperless trail of bytes, or to wonder who might get their hands on it."<sup>25</sup> Yet he also concedes that thus far Google has been discrete about the information it possesses. "To its credit, though, Google has a history of treating users' data with respect."<sup>26</sup>

### 3.4.2: Facebook

For the second example of how the internet can influence our identities I chose Facebook. With about 800 million users Facebook is currently the largest social network site in the world. This also means that any influence through Facebook would have an extremely large impact. Facebook was founded in 2004 by students Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Huges. They started out as a small social network for Harvard University, but soon expanded to other Universities as well. At this time Facebook was not accessible to just anyone, you had to be a student at a University that was recognized by Facebook to be able to sign up. After expanding to high schools as well as companies like Apple and Microsoft Facebook finally became public in September 2006.

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<sup>25</sup> Harry McCracken, [A Google, Google, Google, Google World](#) (PC World August 2005, 17).

<sup>26</sup> Harry McCracken, [A Google, Google, Google, Google World](#) (PC World August 2005, 17).

Social network sites like Facebook are designed to take socializing on the internet to the next level. Instead of just sending your friends and e-mail, you can create your own profile page with which it becomes incredibly easy to share data like pictures, videos, interesting news articles, links, and of course messages. In *Pre-programmed* the Facebook profile page is compared to a shopping window stating “the profile page can be seen as a shopping window from which everyone can choose what he wishes to see, read, or comment on.”<sup>27</sup> What is most important for the developers of the social network site is that users visit the page frequently. Persuasive technology is used to make people return time and time again, creating a sort of dependence. For example Facebook offers a wide range of extra features like Spotify, games and other interesting websites hosted by Facebook which require you to be logged in with Facebook to view them. The fact that Facebook is used as an example in a thesis about identity should come as no surprise, as Facebook is basically a way for people to express their identities online. Facebook, then, can be said to function as a provider of identities. This idea is strengthened by the fact that Facebook requires people to sign up with their real name. This prevents people from creating fake and numerous accounts.

One of the first issues with Facebook and identity is the influence Facebook has on large groups of people. Because of the popularity of Facebook, people who do not have an account can often become pressured into signing up. Through Facebook people stay up to date about what is happening with friends they see every day, but also old friends, faraway friends, family, and co-workers. It is quite common nowadays to hear people talking about what they read or saw on Facebook. People with no Facebook account will have nothing to contribute to these exchanges, but wanting to stay ‘in the loop’ as it were, they might reluctantly sign up after all. This ‘peer pressure’ is one of the reasons Facebook has grown so large in such a short period of time. When signing up to Facebook it requires a lot of information from you right away. It will use persuasive technology to make you give up as much information as possible, like using a percentage for the ‘completeness’ of your profile. Everyone wants to be a 100 %. However, bringing your profile up to 100 % does not ease the peer pressure right away. If anything it increases because now it has become adamant to make friends, because no one wants to appear as having few friends. It has gotten to a point where having a high amount of friends on Facebook can be important to popularity and social status. This is problematic for identities in the way that a social network site can apparently make someone feel insecure about themselves, and it encourages us to judge people based on their amount of friends, which does not necessarily has to have anything to do with their identities. In Sherry Turkle’s book “Alone Together” she offers many examples of students as well as adults worrying about their Facebook profile page. She writes:

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<sup>27</sup> Christian van t’ Hof, Jelte Timmer and Rinie van Est, *Voorgeprogrammeerd [Pre-programmed]* (Den Haag: Boom Lemma Uitgevers, 2012) 62-63.

*“What are the truth claims in a Facebook profile? How much can you lie? And what is at stake if you do? Nancy, an eighteen-year-old senior at Roosevelt, answers this question. ‘On the one hand, low stakes, because no one is really checking.’ Then, with a grimace, she says, ‘No, high stakes. Everyone is checking.’ A few minutes later, Nancy comes back to the question: ‘Only my best friends will know if I lie a little bit, and they will totally understand.’ Then she laughs. ‘All of this, it is, I guess, a bit of stress.’”<sup>28</sup>*

The problem with appearances on Facebook extends to content. Facebook has become a medium through which people can show off how great their lives are. For students this can mean that if you do not regularly post pictures of being out with friends, people might immediately consider you to be less fun to be around. The effect on identity is that we might start ‘boosting’ our Facebook pages with insincere content only to make us seem more appealing or popular. This can lead to misrepresentations of online identities. In “A Review of Facebook Research in the Social Sciences” Robert E. Wilson, Samuel D. Gosling and Lindsay T. Graham speculate about the accuracy of the identity represented through Facebook.

*“[...] most of the information on a profile is furnished by the user, providing opportunities for users to present themselves authentically, to cast themselves in a positive (or negative) light, or even to fabricate some other image. The potential for profile authors to manipulate their profile raises a critical question: Do Facebook profiles convey accurate impressions of the profile owners?”<sup>29</sup>*

Of course Facebook can have many positive influences on identities as well. For example many people have re-connected with friends they knew many years before, which otherwise might never have happened. Also parents and grandparents can find it much easier to stay up to date with their children and grandchildren’s lives through Facebook. For identity this means that social relationships that might not have been there without Facebook are influencing our lives, this can have both negative and positive results, but since you are not forced to connect with anyone you do not want to it seems more likely to yield positive results. Although the fact that we are now connected to such a wide range of people seems positive, it can also have negative effects. This is due to the fact that Facebook forces us to present one identity to different social groups. When you post a message on Facebook, not only can your close friends read this, but also family and co-workers and for some people even their boss. Where in real life we might behave differently when we are among friends than when we are among family, on Facebook there is no such distinction.

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<sup>28</sup> Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other (New York: Basic Books, 2011) 153.

<sup>29</sup> Robert E Wilson, Samuel D. Gosling and Lindsay T. Graham, A Review of Facebook Research in the Social Sciences (Perspective on Psychological Science 2012, 7) 203.

*“These different spheres are traditionally partitioned into different contexts, but on Facebook they are sometimes combined into a single context. A user whose Facebook friends encompass family members, employers, and college friends may have difficulty presenting information that is appropriate across all social spheres simultaneously [...]. For example, a photo of the user drinking heavily may be acceptable in the context of college friends but not in the context of work or family.”<sup>30</sup>*

This forces users to in some way adjust, and will make many rethink their Facebook updates. In a way we could say that the identity presented on Facebook is a completely new one, because it is a number of ‘you’s’ rolled into one. An author who also discusses this problem of Facebook is Omer Tene. In the introduction to his paper titled “Me, Myself and I: Aggregated and Disaggregated Identities on Social Networking Services” he writes:

*“The biggest reason [I avoided joining Facebook] was that I didn’t know which me would join. Apparently, Mark Zuckerberg believes we should all be the same in every context. According to Time’s 2010 Person of the Year profile of him, he once told a journalist, ‘Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity.’ To which my only response is, You’ve got to be kidding. I mean, I’m not even the same person with all the members of my immediate family. And I’ve long thought that my impulse to act differently with, say, my friend from grad school and my husband’s aunt — to adjust my personality to fit the situation and the other person — is an example of good manners, not bad ones.”<sup>31</sup>*

Of course, this argument depends on whether identity is considered static or not, and whether one believes people present different identities in different contexts. However, regardless of what we believe, the fact remains that a setting in which all the different social groups meet is rare, and the mere fact that we have to balance our profile content to the dynamic of people changes the way we think about presenting ourselves. The problem lies in the fact that you could say that many people on Facebook are in fact not a correct representation of their true self, because they are always altering the content of their page to suit others.

### 3.4.3: Dating Websites

The third and final example used in this thesis to stress the influence of the internet on our identities will be the phenomenon dating websites. Dating websites are intended to help people find love

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<sup>30</sup> Robert E Wilson, Samuel D. Gosling and Lindsay T. Graham, [A Review of Facebook Research in the Social Sciences](#) (Perspective on Psychological Science 2012, 7) 212.

<sup>31</sup> Omer Tene, [Me, Myself and I: Aggregated and Disaggregated Identities on Social Networking Services](#) (Journal of International Commercial Law and Technology, 2012) 1.

interests and it goes without saying that a vital part of the dating website is the user profile that is meant to convey the identity of the person looking to find a partner.

Dating websites are getting more and more popular. Research has shown that in the Netherlands 23 % of people between the ages of 16 to 35 admit to using online dating websites. Contrary to the social network scene, where networks like Facebook, MySpace and Hyves dominate, there are in fact countless online dating websites. Dating sites with the highest amount of users in the Netherlands include Lexa & Lexamore, Parship, eDarling, Be2 and Relatieplanet. However, there are also dating websites that cater to very specific needs. As is stated in *Pre-programmed*: “[f]urthermore there are different dating websites for different targets groups, like for religious people (Crosspoint) and for ‘larger’ people (Rubensdating), people who want to date more than one man (Secondlove), vegetarians (Vegadates), people looking for a rich partner (Sugardaddy), single mom’s (Alleenstaande mama’s) or for people who enjoy the outdoors (Greensingles).”<sup>32</sup> Some of the reasons *Pre-programmed* lists for the popularity of online dating websites include the natural need for human beings to be in a relationship, and research has shown that people with relationships are happier overall. Also the way in which our society is developing leaves ample time for socializing, and for online dating you do not actually have to go anywhere to meet someone, so it costs less time. Finally the website can help you find a partner by looking at your profile, so even choosing who to approach is made a lot easier.

Of course dating websites can have positive effects on people’s identities as many people have successfully found a loving partner whom to share their lives with. However, this positive effect only occurs after the search and courtship prove successful. To be able to see how dating websites can have an effect on our identity whilst the search is taking place we need to have a closer look at how exactly identity is presented on the profile page, the page on which other people will judge your personality. On most dating websites you are required to fill out a questionnaire in which you are asked about your hobbies, interests, and other personal details at signup. This data will be of vital importance in matching your profile to that of potential partners. Basic information like sex, age and location are compulsory, and uploading pictures is strongly encouraged on all dating websites. Persuasive technology is hard at work as people receive information telling them profile pages without pictures are less likely to find a match. Often information provided will be as detailed as religion, ethnicity, profession and sometimes even salary. Here again it is stressed that failing to provide information can lead to fewer partner recommendations.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Christian van t’ Hof, Jelte Timmer and Rinie van Est, *Voorgeprogrammeerd [Pre-programmed]* (Den Haag: Boom Lemma Uitgevers, 2012) 92.

<sup>33</sup> Christian van t’ Hof, Jelte Timmer and Rinie van Est, *Voorgeprogrammeerd [Pre-programmed]* (Den Haag: Boom Lemma Uitgevers, 2012) 94.

Because the profile page is made by the users themselves, they determine to a great extent what information is published. When setting up the profile page users will take a critical look at their personalities and really think about how to appear in a most favorable way. The consequence of such critical self-reflection is that people may be reluctant to mention negative aspect of their personalities. The identity of their profile page will therefore most likely not be the most accurate portrayal of their identity, but the most accurate *idea* of their identity that they wish to convey. This pressure to appear in our best light is strengthened when users browse other user profiles and find people seemingly more beautiful and more intelligent than them. In this way the website can be said to add to the pressure of boosting our profiles and altering our identities. However, a more convincing argument is the way in which the sites are notorious about information. For example when you are asked to list hobbies you might find yourself at a loss of what to list (perhaps you work 48 hours a week and hardly have time for anything else), but because you once read a novel and went on a skiing holiday 2 years ago you might list 'reading' and 'skiing' as hobbies. These listings are not necessarily untrue, and it makes your profile look more interesting. This seems like a win-win situation, except that a potential partner might be a real novel-addict, or real enthusiastic about skiing and doing both these things on a regular basis. Unfortunately the exact algorithms used to match people are not public, but it seems logical that shared interests play a role. The problem I am describing is similar to the argument presented before, because when people are asked to give information about themselves they want to appear interesting. A person with no hobbies might make some up, or over generalize like the reading/skiing example. This may seem like a small boost in the presentation of the user, but when many people are using this technique to seem more appealing there is no way to tell the difference between people genuinely interested in a certain subject and people who may have dabbled in it once. Bottom line, the representation of identity on the dating website becomes misplaced, and this can be especially problematic in a setting where people's identities and personalities are very important. As Sherry Turkle writes:"[...] identity work can take place wherever you create an avatar. And it can take place on social-networking sites as well, where one's profile becomes an avatar of sorts, a statement not only about who you are but who you want to be."<sup>34</sup> Last but not least the whole idea of making a profile for a dating website can already bias the content we put in. Where on Facebook we juggle identities like friend, family, and co-worker, the dating website is quite the opposite as we are tempted to present only this part of ourselves that we find to be most appealing to others. Can any identity created simply for the use of attracting potential partners ever really be a good representation of a person, imperfections and all?

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<sup>34</sup> Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other (New York: Basic Books, 2011) 151.



I find this to be quite problematic, and this is certainly an instance where the internet influences our identities to create the most appealing-you possible.

As we have seen thus far, identity exists in the conceptions we have of ourselves, and in interaction with the relations we have with the world around us. The internet can influence these relations and alter our self-representation in a positive as well as a negative way. Reflecting back on chapter 1 we can see that the internet identity is also built over time, and internet 'experiences' can prove to be just as influential as normal life experiences. As for identity *across possible worlds* it appears that the virtual words allows for a representation of identity as well, though this representation need not be 100 % equal to the offline identity. This may be much more problematic with objects, but fortunately the human identity stretches to contain every aspect of a person, in whichever setting, including the internet.

The examples used in this chapter are just a selection of many, so it is important to note that the scope of influence is not limited to what is shown in this thesis. The next chapter will go deeper into how negative influence on identities can have consequences on people as persons, and why this should therefore be prevented.

## 4. Why the influence of the internet on our identities can be problematic

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In order to determine why the influence of the internet on our identities is problematic we need to look into what negative effects this influence has on us as persons, as well as why our identity deserves to remain uninfluenced. This chapter will start by looking into the former. This chapter will also go into how problematic influence can best be prevented. Would a renewed awareness of how the internet directs our identities have an influence on our behavior?

### *4.1. How does negative influence affect us as persons?*

As discussed in chapter two, the notion of *Identity over Time* describes one view on how identity is formed. It dictates that identity is shaped over time, meaning that people can change their identities, and events in a person's life may be the catalyst to such change. For example a happy man that has seen his entire family die, and has lost all his belongings might become bitter, the traumatic event changing his outlook on the world and his views about certain things. With this his identity changes as well. One could say that he was no longer the same man he was before all this tragedy happened. However, this does not mean the event should not have happened because of what happened to the man's identity. This was simply a tragic event that should not have happened due to the grief and suffering it has caused. The influence on this man's identity, however tragic, was in no way problematic because this man was in no way being deceived. This does not mean that I am accusing the internet of deceiving us deliberately, but I do think this happens unintentionally. This example of the man losing his family is of course quite extreme. The influence the internet has on us is much more subtle. Of course we have to realize that we are entering a time in which technology along with the internet is going to make drastic changes to our lives, and this has already begun.<sup>35</sup> The influence this has/will have on people is great. What can be deducted from the examples in chapter 3 is that negative influence can cause approximately the following three results:

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<sup>35</sup> An inspiring and informative presentation on this subject can be found at:  
<[http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/nl/peter\\_diamandis\\_abundance\\_is\\_our\\_future.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/nl/peter_diamandis_abundance_is_our_future.html)>

1. Misrepresentation of identity intentional: For example when people deliberately modify their user profile to appear in the most favorable light by altering the truth.
2. Misrepresentation of identity unaware: For example when a headhunter Googles someone and finds them registered at all kind of non-favorable websites. Little does the headhunter know this was only for a project the person did at University. He proceeds in documenting a false image of the person's identity.
3. Misconception of self: For example the tour guide mentioned in chapter 3 who believes his website is quite popular because it is always at the top of the search results in Google, and derives a sense of accomplishment and confidence from this. Misplaced sentiments and a false conception of what is really happening.

The problematic effects of these occurrences can vary per person. With example (1) consequences can be quite severe depending on the degree to which information was altered. When the truth presents itself it can lead to disappointment and anger with interacting parties and shame on the side of the agent doing the altering. The business of presenting yourself as different than how you really are indicates dissatisfaction within the agent. This in itself is unhealthy for a flourishing agent, as we will see in the next paragraph. Example (2) is also problematic for the agent, although he might not even know this is happening. The case here is that people form a (premature) opinion of someone's identity without consulting the agent. The consequences of this can be life changing as there is no telling what might have happened had someone found your Facebook profile/Google results more favorable. The consequences of example (3) are problematic in the way that this person is setting himself up for disappointment without even knowing it. Misconceptions of the self are perhaps worse than the misrepresentations of identity as a conception of the self is something we build up slowly. Finding out that something about you is not the way you thought it was can be quite shocking and can have a great impact on your wellbeing. For example after experiences such an event a person might start to doubt himself, which in turn can lead to reduced risk taking and overall a change in a person's behavior.

As we have seen from these examples, the negative influence of the internet can have devastating effects on people as persons. Of course not every case will be this extreme, but with millions of people surfing the internet the chance of such examples occurring is certainly not insignificant.

#### *4.2. Why does negative influence matter?*

This question was already answered briefly in the introduction using a quote by Christine Korsgaard. Here it will be answered more thoroughly using the theory of agency by Alan Gewirth. Gewirth's explanation of agency contains the following notions. An agent according to Gewirth can be said to be thinking or saying "(1) I do X for end or purpose E." in which E is something the agent considers to have enough merit to warrant action on his part. From this derives "(2) 'E is good.'" This last sentence is in quotation marks because what an agent considers to be good need not necessarily be a moral good. Having said this, Gewirth moves on to state that in order for an agent to act on his purpose, he must have both freedom and well-being. These two features will play an important role in this argument. Gewirth reasons that "freedom and well-being are the most general and proximate necessary conditions of all his purpose-fulfilling actions, so that without his having these conditions, his engaging in purposive action would be futile or impossible."<sup>36</sup> Because freedom and well-being are necessary to any agent's act, Gewirth claims that therefore any agent has a right to freedom and well-being. "In claiming these rights to freedom and well-being, 'The agent holds that other persons owe him at least noninterference with his freedom and well-being, not because of any specific transaction or agreement they have made with him, but on the basis of his own prudential criteria, because such noninterference is necessary to his being a purposive agent.'"<sup>37</sup> This shows, *prima facie*, that for an agent to be able to lead a flourishing life, the noninterference with freedom and well-being of the agent is required. This quote is the main reason Gewirth is appropriate to this thesis, because it dictates that any interference with freedom and wellbeing is wrong, which is something that had (in this thesis at least) not yet been thoroughly established. This also supports the argument of that the problematic interferences of the internet on identities is wrong because the consequences can also be said to interfere with the freedom and well-being of the agent. An example of interference with our freedom is the way in which our experiences on the internet are narrowed by all kinds of persuasive technologies. We are free only in so far as we provide input into the already established algorithms, which can be argued to not be freedom at all. Of the examples mentioned the idea of tailored content of Google search results can be said to be the opposite of free, because here our own browse behavior 'traps' us in a selection of results that already relate to me and my browsing history, and are therefore not objective at all. The interference with well-being is much easier to explain, as the previous paragraph already shows that things like a misconception of the self can lead to a wide range of negative emotions, including anger, disappointment, and loss

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<sup>36</sup> Ari Kohen, *The Possibility of Secular Human Rights: Alan Gewirth and the Principle of Generic Consistency* (University of Nebraska Faculty Publications: Political Science 2005) 57.

<sup>37</sup> Ari Kohen, *The Possibility of Secular Human Rights: Alan Gewirth and the Principle of Generic Consistency* (University of Nebraska Faculty Publications: Political Science 2005) 57.

of self-confidence. Thus using Gewirth's theory of agency it prima facie appears that negative influence caused by the internet is wrong, and should thus be prevented or justified. Whether there is any possibility for justification is something that merits its own research, and will not be discussed in this thesis.

This paragraph has shown that according to Gewirth's theory of agency the negative influence of the internet on our identities indeed causes strife with the ability of an agent to flourish. It is vital to any agent to be able to act purposive. For any agent action to be considered purposive the agent must be free of interference with both freedom and well-being. It has become apparent that the negative influences discussed in the beginning of this chapter can be considered as interfering with freedom and well-being. This leads to the conclusion that this interference is prima facie wrong and should be prevented or justified.

#### *4.3. How can we protect ourselves from negative influence of the internet*

The main reason the internet has the power to influence us to such a great extent is the fact that very few people actually realize the immense impact the internet is having on us as persons. When using the internet many people do not stop to think about the ways in which most online services and websites are structured to get us to do certain things or act in certain ways. The first logical step to take would appear to be for people to pay attention of what is happening and how they are being influenced. For example when signing up for something on the internet, or when using a service on the internet there is often a page with a user agreement that requires you to check the "I have read the user agreement"- box in order to be able to proceed. Very few people, however, actually read these texts and this is understandable because normally we are in a hurry to start using the service and do not want to spend time reading a legal text. These texts can, however, contain information about how the website or service plans to use your input, and it can also provide the website or service with certain rights of interfering with your usage that you might not even agree to. Another main problem is the fact that when we start using a product, the default settings are often not the most favorable. For example in Facebook it is possible to make your profile page absolutely private, you just have to change this in the settings. New Facebook users will always find their profile pages partly visible to anyone. The same goes for Google. When using Google it is even possible to switch off the option where Google uses your browsing history to help your search. This possibility is hidden away deep in the settings and there is no way for users to know that their search results are tailor made unless they decide to check the settings randomly. Also, Google tracks your browsing history only when you are logged in. For Gmail users, however, this is pretty much all the time since most people at home do not log out of their e-mail accounts, and when they switch to Google pages such

as Google search and Youtube they will still automatically be logged in and everything they do is documented. It appears that a helpful start would be for companies to set their default settings to the most favorable settings for the user. Unfortunately this is unlikely to happen, which means the only one who can do something about the influence the internet has on people are the people themselves. Now that it has become apparent that the internet can also negatively influence our identities I find it is of great importance that internet users examine their behavior closely and make sure the time they spend online does not impact their identities or their conceptions of others negatively. This does not mean that we should limit our usage, because the internet also has an abundance of positive influences and services that make our lives easier and increase our well-being. However, we should not blindly ascribe perfect dependence to the internet when many of its motives and purposes are hidden from view. It seems that ultimately moderation and balance form the key to minimalizing the internet's negative effects.

# 5. Conclusion

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The purpose of this thesis has been to try to answer the question: “how does the internet negatively influence our identity?” Chapter one served to offer some insight into the current discussion surrounding the concept of identity, and to show how online and ‘normal’ identities are formed as well as interrelated. It also offers a working definition of identity for this thesis: the conceptions we have of ourselves, and the interaction with the relations we have with the world around us. In order to answer the question posed in the introduction, some examples of the influence the internet can have were needed. These are presented in chapter 3. The examples include Google, Facebook, and online dating websites. All of these offered ample influence to be considered, and it was concluded that the internet can have both positive and negative influence on our identities as well as well-being. Finally chapter 4 describes the consequences of negative influence of the internet on persons more thoroughly, and also answers the question why it is necessary to have an identity that remains negative-influence-free. This was done using the theory of agency by Alan Gewirth, who establishes that an agent cannot flourish when either freedom or well-being is the recipient of interference. The negative influence of the internet can be categorized as such interference which leads to the conclusion that this should be either prevented or justified. Whether there are situations in which such interference is justified is an interesting topic for future research. Chapter 4 also considers the possibilities of preventing negative influence, and this leads to the conclusion that consumers should be more careful in their internet usage, and preferably gain awareness of exactly how the internet is influencing them. At a time where technology is rapidly evolving, and the internet is playing a bigger role in our lives every day, it seems pertinent that we do not lose sight of what is happening and how these changes are affecting us as persons. This thesis, then, serves as a reminder to open our eyes anew to the now so familiar sphere of the internet. In the coming years the internet and the workings that go on inside of it are expected to grow extremely fast. Along with this will grow the dependence people have on the internet. Many of the data collected by companies today is not even being used yet, but this certainly is no guarantee for the future. The internet grows, and with it, its influence. However, the more people become aware of ways in which they are negatively influenced, the more they will be able to do something about it. The examples listed in this thesis might not be that extreme yet, but there is no doubt that issues such as these will continue to arise in the coming decennia.

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