Article

The Web of Loneliness: A Netnographic Study of Narratives of Being Alone in an Online Context

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Abstract: Using a netnographic and case-study-based approach, this article uses different blogs as data in order to analyse how loneliness is conceptualized and understood. More precisely, the study aims to investigate experiences of loneliness and related themes in the context of online communication. In approaching the nature of loneliness, we have analytically leaned on the theories and some of the most basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism, according to which, social encounters and situations, their qualities and their existence, have a profound impact on emotional life. This study can be read as an archaeology of online loneliness and the findings suggest that the experiences of online loneliness can be categorized in different genres, such as the poetics of loneliness, the diagnostics and self-harm of loneliness, and loneliness and family life. Although loneliness is approached and discussed differently, the bloggers' estranged relationships to society tie these identified genres of loneliness together. The different genres derive their character, form and social dynamics from the narrators' struggle and urge to somehow find a way to fit into contemporary society and achieve satisfying social relationships. Furthermore, displaying and presenting the self, and thus becoming the object of other people's attention and interest, in the context of online communication, can be a profound way of reconnecting to society and hopefully avoiding isolation and marginalization.

Keywords: loneliness; identity; alienation; social relationships; netnography

Loneliness is a common human experience. According to Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010, p. 218), as many as 80% of those under 18, and 40% of adults over 65, report being lonely at least sometimes, with levels of loneliness gradually diminishing through the middle adult years, and then increasing in old age. Loneliness, in terms of perceived social isolation and exclusion, is something each of us is capable of feeling. Living on the edge of "the social", close to (experienced) marginalization/exclusion, often leads to behaviour aimed at reconnecting with people, friends, family, and social networks. However, research also suggests that lonely feeling people sometimes tend not to use their social skills in order to reconnect with others, but instead act in self-protective ways that actually further alienate them from others (Cacioppo et al. 2017). Nevertheless, it is estimated that as many as 15–30% of the general population feel more or less chronically lonely (Heinrich and Gullone 2006). Considering these statistics, it is not surprising that alienation, individualization and loneliness are central themes in social theory. These topics run through the sociological literature, from Durkheim and Simmel to contemporary discourses on modernity, media, and the ways people go about establishing social relationships.

The general assumption concerning loneliness, common in the research on psychosocial problems in general, is that it should be considered harmful to the individual (Herz and Lalander 2017). Cacioppo et al. (2014) have, for example, demonstrated that loneliness carries mortality risk similar

to smoking and that social relationships, or the lack thereof, impact the brain, health and well-being. In a similar vein, Valtorta, Kanaan and Gilbody et al. (Valtorta et al. 2016) have, through a systematic review and meta-analysis, showed that deficiencies in social relationships are associated with an increased risk of developing coronary heart disease and stroke. Scholars have also identified loneliness as a significant risk factor for self-harm, depression and suicide, among other things (Lalayants and Prince 2014; Majorano et al. 2015). Seemingly, one can never totally escape or eliminate the (potential) experience of loneliness, and the only way to handle it is to face and deal with this existential and human experience. But loneliness comes in many different forms—sometimes as a diagnosis of depression, and sometimes as the experience of wandering the streets and enjoying yourself in a global city. The latter form of experience has been vividly described by writers such as Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire, and more recently in the literary works of contemporary writers such as Haruki Murakami and Paul Auster. Loneliness is thus multidimensional, stretching from the experience of modernity and alienation all the way to an extreme social isolation and depression. Furthermore, as a result of technological development in the past few decades, people's ways of (dis)connecting with one another and of dealing with loneliness have also reached the virtual arena of online communications and relationships.

In her influential book *Alone Together*, Turkle (2011) argues that people have become increasingly dependent on media technology, which has become the very architect of our intimacies and the medium through which we construct and perform large parts of our emotional lives. Computers (as well as other virtual platforms) are thus understood as much more than just tools. In fact, they are formative for our social life and part of our individual psychological development, and as such affect the way we think about ourselves and our place in the world (Turkle 2005; see also Turkle 1995; Kozinets 2010). The Internet has facilitated potential forums for social recognition, rejection and self-presentation, and hence places in which the meanings of loneliness are negotiated and dealt with.

1. The Sociological Exploration of Online Loneliness

Using a netnographic and case-study-based approach, this article focuses on online narratives and stories of loneliness. Studying online entries and narratives of loneliness can enable us to better understand how people deal with this emotional state, and how loneliness is expressed and dealt with. More precisely, the study takes an explorative approach aiming to sociologically investigate experiences of loneliness and related themes in the cultural context of online communication. We will use different blogs in order to highlight how loneliness is conceptualized and how the authors of a few strategically selected blogs discuss loneliness and deal with their emotions and their social situation (see the section on research design for further information regarding the sample). This study is primarily explorative, and we are interested in questions such as:

- Is it possible to discern, describe and analyse different genres of addressing loneliness online?
- What can we learn sociologically about the experience of loneliness from studying people's (online) reflections on their lives and on their options for action in certain life situations and contexts?

In approaching the nature of loneliness, we have analytically leaned on the theories and some of the most basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism, according to which social encounters and situations, as well as their qualities and their existence have a profound impact on emotional life (Collins 2004). In this approach, loneliness is not seen as a static feeling. It is not a fixed position, but rather a situational and temporal experience that occurs in relation to social and cultural values, norms and surroundings, and the presence or absence of social connectedness (Rosedale 2007). Loneliness is thus seen as a subjective feeling and distressing experience of social isolation, not necessary related to an objective lack of social relationships (Coyle and Dugan 2012). Although these aspects of feeling alone are interconnected, there is a difference between objective social isolation and subjective feelings of loneliness. A person might, for example, have a rich social life but nevertheless feel lonely; conversely, solitary lifestyles do not always include experienced loneliness (Klinenberg 2012). As we see it,

loneliness emerges in the gap or interface between society and the individual (Herz and Lalander 2017). It is an emotion in motion, which is also related to the experience of what one needs to avoid feeling lonely (Weiss 1973). This means that in some situations/contexts, the individual might experience great loneliness, whereas in others he or she might not.

In a way, people can be seen as predisposed for social interaction and *social responsivity* (Asplund 1992), and any exceptions from this human disposition might be perceived as loneliness. Social behaviour is regulated by norms and normative conceptions of what can be considered as 'normal' and as 'social'. The focus of this study lies in how people use online forums, such as blogs, when exploring and expressing their feelings of loneliness. In this sense, we are exploring people's sense of belonging or not, their urge to be a part of social formations, or of being excluded from intimate relationships or the family.

2. Survey of the Research

The experience of loneliness plays a key role in the phenomenology of contemporary culture. Currently, there is an extensive sociological discussion and literature on different themes related to loneliness (Weiss 1973; Elias 1985). There is, for example, a growing body of longitudinal research that focuses on the relation between loneliness and health, suggesting that loneliness is one of the key predicators of morbidity and mortality (Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010; Shiovitz-Ezra and Ayalon 2010).

In research on loneliness and health, scholars have predominantly focused on two demographic segments of the population that have been shown to be at increased risk of experiencing loneliness. Firstly, we have studies of older adults that highlight the connection between old age and social isolation, loneliness and ill-health (Holmén and Furukawa 2002; Cacioppo et al. 2006; Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; Dykstra et al. 2005). Secondly, there is also a growing body of research on children and adolescents, and loneliness (Krause-Parello 2008; Liepins and Cline 2011). Herz and Lalander (2017) followed "unaccompanied minors" ethnographically over time and showed how young people who might well be experiencing loneliness might simultaneously express a frustration over being repeatedly labelled "unaccompanied" and "lonely" (Kirova 2003; Asher and Paquette 2003). The interactive and symbolic relationship between self and society is evident in this research.

As suggested above, scholars have shown that feelings of loneliness are multidimensional and vary greatly with factors such as age, gender, social status, personality traits, social competence and skills (Borys and Perlman 1985). Adding to this, scholars have also suggested that there is evidence indicating that loneliness tends to cluster in certain families (Segrin et al. 2012). Amato et al. (2007) argue that the great challenge for families today is discovering how to stick together, and how to counteract individualization. Family members spend less and less time together, which leads to a disintegration of the family, according to these authors.

Regarding blogs and other types of social media, research suggests that being active on the Internet can reduce the feeling of loneliness. Online activities that allow people to connect to each other in different ways and socializing can reduce marginalization (Deters and Mehl 2012; Andréasson et al. 2017). This has been discussed by Adler and Adler (2005), who focus on the cyber-worlds of self-injurers. In their study, they show how people who lack social relations with similar others (called "loners"), although isolated and lonely while away from their keyboard, have constructed a myriad of online groups through which they can connect with others who, like themselves, feel as if they are on the margins of society (Adler and Adler 2011; Smith and Stewart 2012; Saba and McCormick 2001). The possibilities to establish or upkeep social relations, and avoid feelings of isolation and loneliness through social media, has also been discussed in studies on, for example, migrant workers who for long periods live geographically isolated from family and friends (Kilkey et al. 2014). Simultaneously, the techno-emotional development of possibilities in recent decades also entails a risk that literal face-to-face meetings and social interactions are being replaced with online confessions, life(style) blogging, quests for yet another Facebook-like, and other mediated means of communicating emotional

status, connectedness with others, and self-understanding/presentation (Pittman and Reich 2016). Researchers have expressed great concern that media technology is undermining human relations, providing a "false" and shallow sense of social connectedness (Turkle 2005; D'Amico et al. 2017). In a volume on loneliness and longing, edited by the three psychoanalysts Willock, Bohm and Coleman Curtis (Willock et al. 2011), the fear that media technology is undermining human relations and interconnectedness is palpable. Several of the contributions in this volume raise the question of whether frequent media and Internet use can lead to disturbances in the self and in identity work. There is an ongoing discussion on young people's use of social media whereby they are tempted to act out their desires in a destructive way, leading to a form of schizoid and imagined connectedness and, in the worst case, a splitting-off from "real" relationships, intimacy and corporeal existence (see also Turkle 2005).

3. Research Design and Methods

3.1. A Netnographic Study Design

Methodologically, this study is inspired by Kozinets (2010) definition of netnography. Using a case-study-based approach, we have directed our focus of attention 'on written accounts resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from on-line, computer mediated, or internet-based communications' (p. 58). Although netnography differs in some ways from conventional ethnography—for example, in its use of Internet communications and exclusion of face-to-face interaction (Sheehan 2010)—nevertheless, it bears many similarities to ethnography as well as anthropology (Hine 2000; Hooley et al. 2012). Online spaces for communication and social media are commonly thematically designed to attract specific groups of people and audiences. Moreover, the technological and social practices on the Internet have also meant that personal and community data have become more open and easier to access than ever before, thus creating a new form of intimacy (Joinson et al. 2007), which affects people's everyday life, how they relate to others and their cultural surroundings (Orgad 2006; Hooley et al. 2012). Kozinets explains (see also Turkle 2011):

> The way in which technology and culture interact is a complex dance—an interweaving and intertwining. This element of technocultural change is present in our public spaces, our workplaces, our homes, our relationships, and our bodies—each institutional element intermixed with every other one. Technology constantly shapes and reshapes our bodies, our places, and our identities, and is shaped to our needs as well. (Kozinets 2010, p. 22)

Influenced by the words of Kozinets, we have focused on different blogs and blog excerpts, taking the perspective that they can be viewed as embedded in specific sociocultural contexts. We are interested in analysing how the bloggers categorize, discuss and schematize their perception of the world, thereby helping to shape a specific understanding of social relations, loneliness and identity. We thus address the blogs as cultural manifestations of how loneliness is experienced and understood, and as such can be theoretically conceptualized (see Porter 1997).

3.2. Sampling Strategy

There is currently a relatively large amount of Internet blogs in which loneliness is touched upon and discussed in different ways, although not always being the explicit thematic focus of attention. There are also discussions about loneliness, social isolation and people feeling alone on many other online forums as well, such as chat groups and different kinds of communities. Blogs explicitly framed as loneliness blogs, which are scarcer, can however generate a more developed, sharp and focused picture of how people develop narratives on loneliness over time. For this study, we have, therefore, carried out a carefully conducted strategic selection of blogs that explicitly address and focus on a variety of experiences and conceptualisations of loneliness. Our sampling strategy was partly based on blog popularity, i.e., a high ranking on number of readers, and partly based on analytical and

theoretical relevance. Hence, in addition to blogs' attractiveness, the aim of the sampling was to identify blogs that together would reflect different representations and conceptualisations of loneliness. In the sampling, we initially identified a relatively small sample of twenty loneliness blogs. Next, we excluded blogs written by professionals, such as psychologists and therapists. Although such blogs are interesting, they give us a more discursive, well-presented and well-framed image of loneliness. After selecting two blogs to exclude from the sample, we thoroughly read the remaining blogs. Finally, utilising a case-study-based approach, we selected three blogs, each representing diverse conceptualisations of loneliness (see next sub-section for further details).

Our first selected blog covers many different themes, such as politics, music, global warming, and more. A woman named Judith (pseudonym) run this blog, and the blog employs a somewhat poetic and philosophical style. Even if this blog discusses a variety of topics, loneliness and how to possibly escape this feeling is a reoccurring and central theme. The second blog is edited by Maria (pseudonym) and in this blog loneliness is primarily discussed and approached in relation to different psychiatric diagnoses and self-harm. Robert (pseudonym) runs the third blog selected and here loneliness primarily is conceptualised in relation to hegemonic representations of the nuclear family and the meanings of involved parenthood.

As we see it, the case study approach has the advantage of allowing rich and nuanced personal portraits (Yin 2014). Thus, the contribution of this study lies in connecting subjective experiences of loneliness as an emotion that changes over time with different conceptualizations and contextualisations of this experience. In this sense, this study can be read as three portraits and an archaeology of online loneliness. What we are trying to do is to build a mosaic through three voices about how loneliness is experienced in the context of online interactions in contemporary society.

3.3. Data Analysis

Within netnography, data collection does not happen in isolation from data analysis (Kozinets 2010, p. 95, see also discussion above). Therefore, in the selection of excerpts, we have aimed to capture narratives in which experiences of loneliness are discussed dynamically within the blogs, and subsequently how these discussions can be understood in terms of identity constructions and loneliness conceptualisations.

Our analysis and interpretations of data were derived from complete transcripts of the three selected blogs. These transcripts were read repeatedly by both of the authors, and in dialog they were coded into themes that both responded to the study's more theoretical imbued purpose and at the same time, on a subjective level could capture the empirical meanings being expressed regarding loneliness (cf. Aspers 2007). The themes that emerged in the coding process, also representing our three selected blogs, concerned (1) The poetics of loneliness; (2) Loneliness, diagnostics and self-harm behaviour; and (3) Loneliness and family life.

The coding analysis was conducted manually and initiated inductively. Three new and separate Word documents (one for each blog) were then created, in which excerpts from the blogs that explicitly addressed loneliness were compiled. Gradually developing our understanding of the data and the emerging focus of attention in our themes, we could refine our research questions (Kozinets 2010, p 119). We made theoretically imbued notes when reading these documents, aiming to contextualise the excerpts and further developing our theoretical toolbox (Aspers 2007). Then, we re-read the excerpts in each document again, attempting to check and refine our understanding of the data as well as our theoretical framework and existing body of knowledge (Andréasson et al. 2017). Through this circular process and constant movements between empirical data on the one hand, and theoretical and analytical tools on the other hand, we sought excerpts that, in a nuanced way, could respond to the purpose of the study (Kozinets 2010; see also Bowler 2010; Fangen 2005).

3.4. Ethical Considerations

There are some ethical issues associated with the use of blogs and Web pages as empirical material. For instance, bloggers may not expect their comments to be read and discussed by researchers outside their community, which raises questions about consent and degree of publicity (Walther 2002). At the same time, conversely, it is also fairly reasonable to assume that any "person who uses publicly available communication systems on the Internet must be aware that these systems are, at their foundation and by definition, mechanisms for the storage, transmission, and retrieval of comments" (Walther 2002, p. 207). The status of the selected blogs is also that they are accessible to anyone with an Internet connection (see also Andreasson and Johansson 2013; Rosenberg 2010). This means that no form of subscription or registration is required to gain access to the blogs. On the basis of this, it is possible to conclude that the bloggers see no reason to protect their personal privacy and that their postings can be considered public communications (Grodzinsky and Tavani 2010). This fact, however, does not give us the right to use material published on the blogs as we please. Some of the blogs contain sensitive material and there is a potential for psychological harm to the selected bloggers, depending on the way results are presented (King 2011). When selecting excerpts, we have therefore limited our analysis to focus on excerpts that facilitated relevant analyses of the construction of loneliness, and refrained from using any particularly sensitive or personal information (Andreasson and Johansson 2013).

During our work with analysing the material, we initially tried to contact the bloggers for informed consent, but we did not succeed in establishing a satisfactory contact with all three bloggers. Therefore, we chose to use another strategy to conceal and protect the blogger's identities, even though the blogs can be viewed as public communications. In order to minimise the risk of inconvenience or hazard to the bloggers, we have chosen not to quote directly from blog posts but instead use paraphrases and indirect excerpts. As suggested by King (2011), this strategy offers a degree of anonymity because it is much more difficult to use search engine technology in order to link together specific contributors/bloggers with the issues discussed in the research. The intention has thus been to secure anonymity and at the same time preserving the essential meaning of the material being paraphrased (King 2011). There is of course a question of loss of information when avoiding verbatim quoting from blog posts. To us, however, the commitment to protecting privacy has been seen as paramount (see also Eysenbach and Till 2001; Sixsmith and Murray 2001).

4. Findings

The text in this section is structured into three sub-sections, systematically addressing and exploring the three selected blogs and how they conceptualise loneliness. Each section will touch upon central questions raised in the introduction, as well as the main purpose of the study, which will be explicitly addressed also in the Concluding section. For the sake of its (n)ethnographic approach, this section will also adapt a somewhat empirical and descriptive narrative. The theoretical positioning of the study will thus appear implicitly rather than explicitly.

4.1. The Poetics of Loneliness

One key theme that recurs throughout in our first selected blog, run by Judith, is that there are different experiences and understandings of loneliness. She introduces the blog by explaining that it focuses on thoughts on life and how to live your life well, as well as hard stuff such as heartbreak. In the blog, Judith repeatedly tries to explore the meaning of loneliness, and she also tries to understand what relationship and friendship mean to her. Regarding friendship, for example, we can read the following:

> I got an email from a friend that made me think about friendship. What does that mean for me? He just forwarded, someone else's meditation on this issue, on friendship. It included a discussion that it is something you could die for, which made me think of army buddies. But this is not friendship for me. The first thing that comes to mind is people going further

> than they could without the friendship—you know, friendship is enabling things, makes easier somewhat. This line of though got me thinking of Montaigne (essay writer) and the friendship he had with his friend, who died very early. I read somewhere that all Montaigne's essays were written with this friend in mind, and that he could not have written them without the friendship. His friend was seen as an equal—which he lacked except for this particular friend. (Judith's blog)

To Judith the idea of writing to an equal like Montaigne, resonates well with her approach to friends and friendship. When exploring intimate relationships, she often connects to literature, philosophy and popular culture. This particular type of *intertextuality* is central in the blog. Personal experiences and thoughts are constantly related to cultural experiences, and to texts and images dealing with intimacy and the experience of longing and loneliness. In a way, Judith's understanding of friendship and loneliness are given meaning in the intersection between different textual surfaces, for example, in the interface between the writings on friendship by Montaigne and her own reflections in the blog.

Judith is highly engaged in music: she plays in a local band, writing songs and performing, and is also a politically engaged speaker. So words are important to her, and she is somehow using the blog to better comprehend her own life and place in the world. Although seemingly aware of what she needs to do in order to deal with experiences of loneliness, and partly also how to reach such a goal, at the same time she presents her quest as a failure. Somehow, she cannot connect the intertextuality of her quest—the songs, the words, the lyrics and ideas—with an actual love relationship. In one entry, Judith tells us about her last love relationship, and how it ended. The entry can be read as an attempt to deal with sorrow, but it is also an attempt to piece together this experience with the *poetics of life*, through songs, poetry and art. Judith is listening to a song by Jim Reeves, "Gentleman Jim", and she immediately starts to associate it to her own life, her separation, love story and pain.

> I just heard the words in my head. I heard the song playing and I knew what Jim Reeves was talking about. It's been a couple of years now since my husband left. He left me for someone else three years ago, and it is just about our anniversary of that. I woke up with the lyrics and the words going through my head. Initially I thought our break-up would be so easy. Our relationship had lots of stresses. But as it turned out it hasn't been easy at all. All these crazy inside stuff has surfaced—like me all of a sudden starting to appreciate all the good things about him instead of, like before, focusing on what I didn't appreciate. (Judith's blog)

Through the music and the blog, Judith invites the reader in many ways into a self-therapeutic exploration of loss, broken relationships, and existential wonders. There are various ways of interpreting this particular presentation of the self. Through the repeated connections to culture, popular music, lyrics and poems, however, Judith somehow tries to make her own feeling of loneliness, her own experiences of loss, comprehensible and readable. It is possible to see this strategy as an attempt to make her experience more general, more universal, toning down the subjectivism and individuality. This is further exemplified in the following posting in which Judith discusses the legacy of her father.

> My father's legacy has two sides. First we have his passion for fairness and justice. Second we have his inability to reach out far into the world. I have also cared passionately, and at the same time failed reaching out into the world to make the impact that I´ve felt I should be making. Legacies are complex in that way. I think of the strengths that we have inherited, but also the weaknesses. Fears that bind us, bravery, insights and all other things we won't see. I see this complexity in all of us, taking on the mammoth task of saving or maybe even improving our Western civilization. (Judith's blog)

In the excerpt above, the question of loneliness seems ever-present. Not being able to reach out in the world to make a difference, due to inherited strengths and weaknesses, is hard for Judith.

She experiences a limited agency in terms of her ability to make an impact, and when it comes to the idea of doing something good for Western civilization, the task becomes a burden, somewhat creating a rich soil for a growing feeling of loneliness.

Georg Simmel (Simmel 1908/1991) made some key observations on style and the experience of being modern. He saw the striving for style as an attempt to unburden and conceal the personal and subjective. Following this line of thought, style and stylization can be used to deal with the exploitation of the modern ego, and can be seen as a way of turning subjective pain and sorrow into something more general, cultural and universal. Turning toward culture and society, for example, can be interpreted as a way for Judith (the individual) to become a social being, partly included and a part of a community of people with shared interests, ideas and values.

4.2. Diagnosed for Loneliness and Self-Harm

Moving on to our next genre of loneliness blogs, we enter a category of blogs that are related to different psychiatric diagnoses, in which the bloggers often present themselves as "diagnosed" (Landstedt and Gådin 2011). If we use available search engine technology and search for self-injury, for example, we find quite a number of blogs on this "theme", most of which are written by women. Most people reporting self-injuries are also female, and according to the statistics relatively few men harm themselves (Fjelldal-Soelberg 2013). Among the causes of self-injury, we find a lack of serotonin, personality disorders and socio-cultural factors. In the selected case study and blog for this genre and section, however, we are primarily interested in how a young woman called Maria portrays herself and elaborates on a certain self-description. Maria is twenty-years-old and describes herself as having an eating disorder, ADHD and a borderline diagnosis. When it comes to social situations and intimacy, it appears she desires and fears both. Maria explains:

> I have to learn how to manage by myself. Sometimes I just reject people who could support me. At the same time I feel bad about that, of course. In a way it increases the pain. So, I will try to make them approach me (which they don't as they just do not know what I want). It really hurt when R left me. We had lots of quarrels. But it was also something worth struggling for. It is always worthwhile struggling. I do not know how to handle loneliness, although I am actually not lonely. But it feels that way. It does not matter how many people I have around me, I still feel empty. But it is really nice having someone to grab and to talk to. It feels good, but it is not that easy. It feels good for a while, but then I need nourishment, and I do not want to press this onto anyone (Maria's blog).

A key feature of the self-presentation in this blog is the ambivalent relationships to others, and the somewhat vague or fluid perception of "normality". Maria realizes that she has a social network including friends. She is not alone; nevertheless, her sense of loneliness is abundantly present in the different postings. The blog also contains detailed descriptions of different methods of self-harm, sometimes complemented by pictures of wounds and scars. Entering the blog, the reader is given an image of a *subcultural world*, filled with anxiety, cuts and shame. Although these aspects of the blog can be understood as expressions of quite asocial behaviour, there are strong social components in the way in which Maria considers and presents herself. The formation of a social self is actually very much in focus. While on the one hand the feeling of being different is strong, there are moments when this stigma is questioned. She engages in repeated exploration of the borderlands between perceived normality and abnormality. In her perceived subcultural position, her body becomes both an object of governmentality and a site for admiration, pleasure and attention (we will return to the latter in a while). This subcultural position is continuously explored in relation to thoughts about normality and the normalization of certain values and ideas, which is exemplified in the excerpt below:

> I do not want any more scars. Not scars that comes from cutting anyway. But I have no lighter. Fuck, why didn't I buy one today. But no, no; I will try to put up with this. I guess it is better to think: "I will do it later". Then, the urge to do something will lessen.

> But anyhow, there is some form of compulsion in this, and in all behaviours of course.
> In a way I want to capture the moment when I want to harm myself. I am afraid it will
> pass by. But, I really want to feel fine also, of course. But what is that really? It feels like
> a long way to go; or, I have felt that way, but I feel bad even when I feel good/ . . . /I really
> bother about what other people think of me. The others maybe think I am really silly, not
> managing as much as "the others". But I want someone to understand me. Imagine if I am
> not feeling worse than anyone else? Everyone has problems! (Maria's blog)

The self-presentation in this blog is highly ambivalent and contains a mixture of self-admiration and shame/guilt (McDonald et al. 2007). Maria's sense of loneliness is also created somewhat through her uncertainty of how she is perceived in *the eyes of the Other*. Using the words of Butler (2009), she finds herself in the interface between the "grievable" and the "ungrievable". These concepts are used to analyse how some people are perceived as less human than others, and consequently seen as "ungrievable". Maria's experience of loneliness is related to her fear of being "ungrievable". On the other hand, the blog contains supporting voices commenting on Maria's worries, anxieties and practices of self-harm. These voices, from readers who have published their comments on her blog, offer hope and assure Maria that she is grieved for. There is thus a sense of the presence of a community of self-harmers (Adler and Adler 2005, 2011; Fjelldal-Soelberg 2013).

Although there is an awareness of the problematic and sometimes antisocial nature of self-harm in the blog, the postings also tend toward an exhibitionistic presentation of self-injury, to a certain degree of pleasure in the confessions about injuring and damaging the body. This cult of the scars, wounds, and blood also forms an important part of the subcultural lifestyle of the self-harmer and blogger.

> I have harmed myself, and thrown up again today. It really feels great (fuck, I hope I am
> not triggering anyone now, because it does not feel terrific at all!! In the long run it really
> brings you down, and it is hard to stop, resulting in a lot of scars). I try to calm myself
> down; punish myself, it is a good feeling, and the compulsion. It is this voice saying that
> you must do more and more. That voice is there all the time. You have to show that you
> can hurt yourself, that you hate yourself; I have to show myself. It does not feel okay to
> like me now. Recently I liked myself. I felt good about how I have developed my qualities
> in painting in school (Maybe I will even post a picture, I am that satisfied); but now I feel
> that I cannot nourish that feeling anymore (Maria's blog).

Here, the experience of loneliness is found in the very hiatus, the dislocation between feelings of normality versus abnormality, of being satisfied versus wanting to punish/hurt oneself. Maria is alternately trying to discipline herself towards (ab)normality, and is talking about how to treat/discipline her body in different ways in order to situate it in relation to her history, her social connections, her personality and society. What we have in this case study is thus a highly ambivalent and conflict-ridden way of dealing with the social. Maria wants to be part of a social community, a group of people, yet in some ways desires the position of an outsider and outcast. Her relationship to the social is thus painful and contradictory in nature, and in dealing with loneliness the (social) body becomes, in certain ways, a canvas through which these feelings are channelled. Another, related, way of interpreting this blog narrative is that, like many young women, Maria may find adapting/fitting into *emphasized femininity* troublesome, and inscribing loneliness onto one's own body can be understood, in some sense, as a challenge to normative definitions of gender (Connell 1995; Fjelldal-Soelberg 2013). Consequently, a lack of control over normative gender configurations may find expression as feelings of loneliness, just as control over one's own body and social relationships may improve feelings of agency, thus challenging the image of being lonely.

4.3. Family Life and Loneliness

In our third case study, we direct our attention to questions concerning loneliness and family life. Concerning idealized and normative perceptions of families, the *heterosexual nuclear family* is

still the predominant socio-cultural conception of what a family is and should be. Although the dominance of this family structure is decreasing in many countries, most children still grow up in nuclear families. There is currently a plethora of blogs in which ordinary (nuclear) family life is held up to view, discussed and displayed. While a majority of the existing blogs on this theme seem to focus on the joys of being part of such a unit, there are also blogs that address the longing for or loss of a family.

In this section, we will focus on a blog run by a man called Robert. This blog starts with a description of Robert's experiences of going through divorce and gradually losing contact with his children. Robert describes his strained relationship with his ex-wife, including being accused of being a bad father. He also describes how the ex-wife initiated a legal process to gain sole custody of their two children, and although the court decision allowed Robert to see his children on a regular basis, the arrangement did not work out well. According to Robert, his ex-wife used different means to undermine the shared custody arrangement, and during certain periods also made sure that he did not see his children at all. This blog can thus be read as a report on a young father's feeling of being disconnected from his children and family life. It is filled with stories of longing, loneliness and frustration. Robert describes his situation:

> I miss my children. The past days I've been working almost 24 h a day. I love my work, but the long hours also work as a form of escape. The other week I've had to deal with many impressions. Normally, work tends to make me think about other things, and not my children, and my longing for them. But when I worked on a museum located close to an amusement park, I saw lots of kids all the time. They were the same age as my children, and they enjoyed themselves with their parents. This made me think, a lot, about my kids. All these feelings are stirred up, feelings I usually manage to suppress and deny—by working hard and not trying to connect to all these upsetting feelings/ . . . /Kids, I love you, hope to see you soon! (Robert's blog).

In a way, this blog can be read as a narrative of masculinity (Connell 1995). Robert describes how he turns into a workaholic. He also tells us about how he uses his job, and long hours at work, in order to cope with his feelings of loneliness. He becomes an invisible breadwinner for a family he no longer needs to provide for. This is also a story about feelings of loss and longing and about an emotionally engaged masculinity (Anderson 2009; Autonen-Vaaraniemi 2010; Stevens 2015). Robert not only defines his masculinity in relation to work, but also in relation to his children. He uses the blog and people's reactions as a form of therapy and a self-help tool. He is not merely describing his own feelings, reactions, coping strategies and everyday life experiences of loss, but also connecting to more general ideas about the modern family, fatherhood, and the legal system for families today.

Although the blog contains a rather hopeful story of a man struggling with his feelings of loss and disconnectedness from his children, there are also streams of dark thoughts, depression, and hopelessness.

> Another Wednesday and I have not seen my children, and it seems like several weeks will pass before I can see them again. But they got their Christmas presents, which lowers my anxiety somewhat. Sometimes I want to explain to all my friends, especially those who think I act odd, and particularly on Wednesdays, that I'm not feeling well. Even though I try to be courageous, I feel awful right now. I have a period off from work, and when I'm off work, I have time to think and feel, which is not that good actually. I only think about the kids, and even though I love them, this fills me up, and makes me feel terrible. (Robert's blog)

This kind of narrative on (lost) parenthood, related to somewhat normative conceptions of the nuclear family as well as women as primary caregivers, is actually quite common (Andreasson and Johansson 2016). Research on fatherhood, for example, is filled with similar stories

of divorce, broken relationships, and custody problems (Dermott 2008; Dienhart 1998). This is also a story of loneliness and of fathers turning themselves into workaholics as they try to cope with their feelings of loss and longing. As an example of this, Robert's blog shows us how personal life and subjective feelings can be connected to changes in family life, legal decisions, and social service procedures for dealing with custody disputes.

5. Conclusions

> The roots of our human impulse for social connection run so deep that feeling isolated can undermine our ability to think clearly, an effect that has a certain poetic justice to it, given the role of social connection in shaping our intelligence. (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008, p. 11)

Loneliness is largely a social phenomenon and a social form. People's understanding and experience of loneliness must therefore be seen as filtered through, coloured by and shaped by more general stories and narratives of modern man's alienation and troublesome relationship to the social. In this study, we have analytically approached blogs with a well-developed focus on loneliness. Our claim is that studying these blogs enables us to get closer to an understanding of how people frame, develop and narrate their stories of loneliness in relation to their perceived place in the world. This is just one of many ways of approaching the subject of loneliness in contemporary culture and society.

The present findings clearly indicate that feelings of loneliness can be framed in diverse ways. Clearly, however, the individual's interactive but estranged relationship to the social and to society is a common pattern in the different genres of loneliness identified here. The fear of being alone, or of being consumed by feelings of loneliness, is also a fear of being cut off from social relations, of being excluded from society. The different genres of loneliness derive their character, form and specific social dynamics from the struggle and urge to somehow find a way to fit/link into society, and to achieve a satisfying social connection and connectedness. This is clearly a common and paradigmatic narrative in the bloggers' conceptualizations of loneliness. However, beyond this core of similarity, the selected blogs reveal clear differences. What we suggest is that this ambiguity creates an analytical window through which one can see how different understandings and experiences of loneliness manifest themselves in the context of online interaction and contemporary society.

Firstly, the poetics of loneliness is a genre characterized by an attempt to use cultural content, poetry, music, lyrics, paintings and other forms of cultural expression to understand one's own particular situation, feelings and alienation; exemplified by Judith's blog and her feelings of being disconnected from friends and from a potential partner/lover. Culture, here, becomes a surrogate, but also a means of reconnecting to sociality, society, and relationships. This form of loneliness has a depressive and nostalgic touch; it is also a common theme in literature and art, providing endless narrative possibilities for therapeutic self-reflection and the care of the self.

The second genre is much more desperate and in some ways anti-social. On the other hand, it is also defined by the writer's attempts to reintegrate into society, to become part of a circle of friends. This struggle takes place on the edge of the social, and cutting oneself can turn into even more serious forms of depressive, destructive and deadly behaviour. Ambivalence is a strong feature, as are the fast transitions between feelings of being either inside or outside society. The narrative structure within this loneliness genre also shows strong temptations to transgress social boundaries, and to become "the other"—an outsider. However, the intensive presence online and the will to somehow explore and heal the body, might be interpreted as a striving to find ways to reconnect to social life and as a sign of a will to belong.

Finally, the parental and family genre relates to (the failure to uphold/follow) normative conceptions of family life. Here, loneliness is filtered through the process of trying to become and be a present parent (in this case, a father), which can be read as a struggle to (re)connect to society, and to fulfil both real and symbolic functions in relation to normative gender scripts for men and women, respectively. Today, as men are increasingly expected to be more present for their children, being a neglecting or absent father entails being marginalized. In this sense, the striving to connect

and develop bonds with one's children can be seen as a self-therapeutic strategy used to enter into the social and become someone, thus escaping loneliness.

Although the three genres of loneliness identified in the study highlight the variation in how people relate to their feelings of loneliness, there are significant common traits in the bloggers' estranged and troublesome relationships to the social and to society, which the bloggers try to "enter" by different means (becoming part of society). Furthermore, in a more speculative vein, the lifestyles and social positions expressed in the blogs also seem somehow to challenge normative definitions of gender, although this conflict is not brought forward and openly discussed in the blogs. Nevertheless, it is possible to analyse these stories and genres in relation to wider discourses on gender, family, and identity. A common characteristic of the three genres is that they produce narratives of what happens when individuals challenge gendered and normative notions of, for example, being a good man and father, or being a sexually attractive and 'feminine' woman. Hegemonic definitions of gender, intimate relationships and families, also create normative boundaries and definitions of what it means to be included or excluded from intimate relationships and social formations.

The kinds of blogs and narratives on loneliness displayed on the Internet are quite a new phenomenon. Displaying and presenting the self, and thus becoming the object of other people's attention, interest, and communication, can be a profound way of reconnecting to the social and hopefully avoiding isolation and marginalization. What has been studied here is, therefore, also a new self-therapeutic method of handling and dealing with isolation and feelings of loneliness and maybe also a new way of getting a new chance to reconnect to social contacts and social embeddedness.

The scope of this article is limited. We have focused on three approaches to loneliness, concentrating on exploring these narratives and genres. This explorative approach may hopefully lead to further investigations of online narratives of loneliness. Furthermore, there is also a need to explore and investigate how online narratives are integrated into and used in everyday life as self-therapeutic tools and solutions to existential and depressive feelings of loneliness.

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