

Image communication and self-injurious behavior on the internet: an exemplary analysis of the images presented on YouTube, social network sites and personal homepages.¹

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Abstract

As a special form of behavior a lot of public attention is drawn to self-injury as more and more adolescents are affected by it. The present paper deals with the visual imaging of self-injurious-behavior within different areas of the internet. The virtual presentations on YouTube, social network sites and personal homepages were exemplarily examined and compared, the presented visual material was analyzed via qualitative analysis. It became clear that self-injurious-behavior – also presented through authentic biographical footage – was mostly shown on YouTube, followed by personal homepages, whereas this topic didn't appear or was only barely (publicly) dealt with on social network sites. From a media theoretical perspective, the reason for these results lies in the fact that the media and its characteristics support the showing of wounds as a promoted form of self-disclosure, or that it can be interpreted as a special form of in-group-communication that is transported via a medium.

Keywords

self-injury, self harm, non-suicidal self injury (NSSI), internet, personal websites, social network sites, video, YouTube, self presentation, communication.

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1. Introduction

“They cut their arms with razor blades, stub out cigarettes on their skin or touch hot plates. Why does one hurt himself so much?”³

This quote describes the praxis of self-injurious-behavior. A behavior is defined as self-injurious if individuals hurt themselves deliberately and solely cause self-injury that does not stand in a suicidal or sexual motivated context; a phenomenon that provides an example for how the body (corpus) transforms to a central medium of communication.

If one looks at this phenomenon considering the relevance of new media for adolescents in their everyday's life (MPFS 2009), the question arises, in what way and in which form adolescents (visually) communicate and deal with self-injurious behavior on the internet. The main focus is drawn to the aspect of the transformation of the physical in virtual space. This analysis focuses on visual descriptions as image experience and image communication play a decisive role in the daily routine of adolescents (Marotzki/Niesyto 2006) and because this way of communication is able to project the physical visually in the virtual. This exemplary analysis was undertaken in three virtual spaces: the video platform YouTube, social network sites (facebook) and personal homepages. The background to the image analysis builds the fact that communication via visual material is cognitively differently processed and because of its associative character visual communication is primary emotional communication (Müller 2003).

2. Self-injurious behavior

2.1. Definition

The term of self-injurious-behavior subsumes, as already referred to, different behavioral forms during which people deliberately hurt themselves. It is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon which has to be isolated from behavioral manners that

³ Translated by the author; from Schmiedekampf 2007, retrieved from: <http://www.spiegel.de/schulspiegel/leben/0,1518,524757,00.html> (16.01.2010).

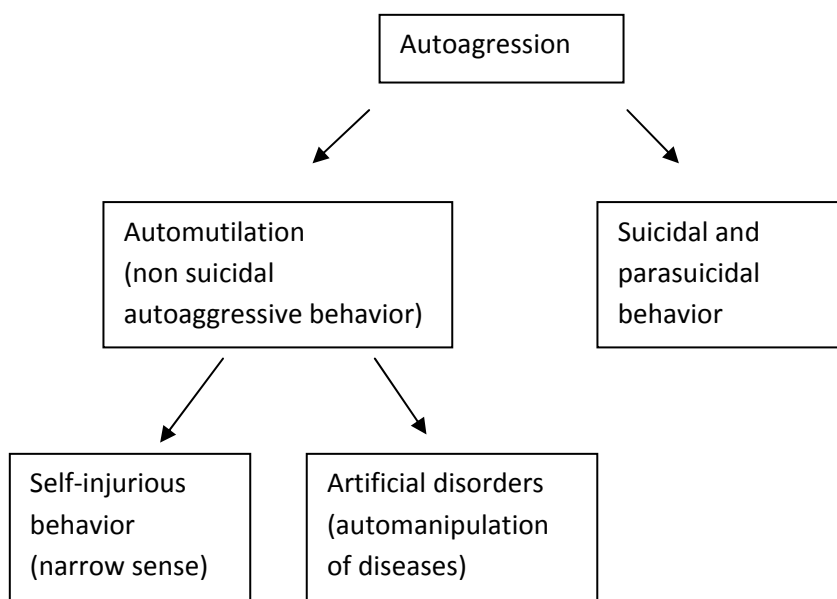
indirectly damage the body, e.g. chronic drug or medication abuse (Petermann/Winkel 2009: 17). On this basis self-injurious behavior is defined as a behavior during which individuals deliberately and solely cause great self-injury that does not stand in a suicidal or sexual motivated context. Auto aggressive not suicidal behavior is also declared as “self mutilation” or as “self harm” (Scharfetter 1991). In the center of this clinical picture stands the body that functions as a medium of expression for the psychological inner: “Self-injury is one part of a large repertoire of behaviors that involve the body in the expression of distress within the individual” (Babiker/Arnold 1998: 2).

Self-injurious-behavior can be described by four main characteristics (Petermann/Winkel 2009: 23):

- Functional motivated injury or damage of one’s body
- Injury in direct or obvious forms;
- Socially not accepted injury;
- Non suicidal intentions.

Self-injurious-behavior can be integrated in auto aggressions as follows (graphic):

Figure 1: Classification of self injury, by Hänslı (1996)



Petermann/Winkel 2009: 20 (translated by the author)

Preferred body regions for the self-injurious behavior is the skin surface that is (substantially) damaged by cuts with razor blades, shards of glass or other sharp objects (71%, Briere/Gil 1998: 614).⁴

There were correlations found between the symptom of self mutilation and other symptomatic patterns: self-injurious behavior seems often to appear together with posttraumatic stress disorder, the borderline personality disorder (BPD) and eating disorders.⁵ In a study concerning the motives for self-injurious-behavior (Favazza/Conterio 1989) the sample stated that they would hurt themselves to gain self-control (72%), to decrease tension (65%), to avert depression (58%), as a method to find themselves back in reality (55%), to reduce loneliness (47%), to punish themselves (40%), because inside voices tell them to (20%), or because of bad spirits (12%). Self-injurious behavior appears the most at a class of age between 18 and 24 years which speaks for a highly adolescent phenomenon. As another result it was found that mostly girls and women would be affected by this symptom (Sachsse 1994; McLane 1996; Nichols 2000; Suyemoto 1998) and that a wide spread of this phenomenon seems likely to happen in the future (Wüsthof 2006: 46).

2.2 Functions of self-injurious-behavior

There are four different functions of self-injurious-behavior, whereas function c) and d) build the center of this paper written from a media and communication studies perspective.

a) Affect regulation:

The most important function of self-injurious behavior described in the psychological literature is the affect regulating function (Petermann/Winkel 2009). Apon self-injury are emotions of dissociation or tension that are about to be ended through self-injury (Klonsky 2009). *“The contact with the environment aborts. It seems as if I lose grip of reality. That*

⁴ Other body regions could also be affected; self-injurious-behavior as well appears in tearing out hair, breaking bones, the amputation of limbs, genital mutilation, castration or damaging the eyesight. “The regularity, frequency, duration, situation relation, as well as the awareness and the degree of automatism of self-injurious-behavior can strongly vary and do not always necessarily concern the same body part” (Hänsli: 21f.; translated by the author).

⁵ The prevalence of self-injury make up 13% of personality disorder, between 25 and 40% of eating disorders, whereby significantly more women/girls are affected by this symptom than men/boys (Resch 2001: 4).

*state is horrible. I am afraid I could become insane. I hit myself until my skin becomes red. I shower so hot that I almost burn myself. But I don't feel anything. Then the strong urge arises. I cut myself and let the blood slowly flow down my skin. The red warm blood gives me a feeling of relaxation and shelter. Then I feel the pain again. Only then I have the feeling I am back inside me".*⁶ (Eckhardt 1994: 117). This quotation exemplarily shows how self-injury ends feelings of dissociation by channeling emotions to the physical.

b) Coping burdensome occurrences

Self-injurious-behavior is often directly connected to burdensome occurrences that people concerned cannot cope with. Prior to these incidents usually are corresponding traumatizations that lie in childhood so that the present symptom stands in a context of posttraumatic disturbance. This escape into self-injury represents a dysfunctional coping strategy (Petermann/Winkel 2009: 68) that helps the affected person to control his or her feelings and endure the present burdening situation.

c) Communicative functions

Different studies have shown that people affected by self-injurious-behavior have problems to express their emotional state verbally (Petermann/Winkel 2009: 69) and that self-injurious behavior therefore can be seen as an attempt to communicate. An explorative study of interviews (Machoian 2001) concludes that self-injury – because it is communicated via the body – seems suitable to people in question to express their feelings and that self-injury therefore is able to function as an authentic communication which cannot be manipulated by third persons: *„It's, it's an actualization of pain, you know ...“*; *„When they see it, like actually see (a cut), they're like, wow, maybe something is wrong ...“*; *„Like people don't listen to you. Like me, I cut when people don't listen“* (Machoian 2001). Moreover it can present a form of adolescent behavior that involves dissociation in which they draw an inner (and exterior) borderline to parents/adults and communicate or symbolically express their otherness.⁷

⁶ Translated by the author.

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http://www.welt.de/welt_print/article1016395/Jeder_vierte_Jugendliche_fuegt_sich_selber_Schmerzen_zu.html

d) Group membership

Moreover, self-injurious-behavior can take the function of communication of social identity. This can be shown when self-injurious behavior presents a constitutive element of group membership. Studies have shown that self-injurious behavior can operate as a social affinity within groups of stationary borderline patients: “The majority of DSH [deliberate self-harm, S.M.] contagion can be understood in terms of small-group rites for feelings of togetherness” (Taiminen et al.1998: 211). As well as in the so called Emo⁸ subculture where self-injurious-behavior (“cutting”) for some seems to fulfil the function of a constitutive element of group membership or at least an adequate communication of emotions.

2.3 Personal injury as a cultural phenomenon – dimensions of meanings concerning the skin

Every culture is aware of deliberate interventions in one’s body. Phenomenon of body modification and injury can already be found in the earliest development of human beings (60.000 years B.C.; Kasten 2006: 17). They are often found in the context of religious or ritual acts⁹ and for instance mark the transition from one part of life to the next, are connected to cultural belief of beauty or seen as symbols of magical powers¹⁰ (Kasten 2006). For example: tattoos or the piercing of body parts to “decorate” the skin with scars (scarification¹¹) or different forms of circumcision on boys and girls. Cutting as a psychological symptom of deviation is seen as a special phenomenon of western culture (Teuber 2004). This can be lead back to the fact that our culture presents the body in its unharmed form as a social ideal. The skin hereby represents a special meaning– psychoanalytically speaking – “provides the psychological apparatus with those ideas which lead to the self development and its

⁸ Emo=Emotional (Hardcore). A youth culture that presents itself as emotional and sensitive (with an androgynous style of fashion) and can be described as follows: “At the beginning there was a musical direction: Emocore is a spin-off of Hardcore Punk, only more melodiously and more emotional. Later appeared an aesthetic puzzled together out of other youth cultures – Shoes from the skater scene, drainpipe jeans from punks, hair styles as in Japanese mangas. Emos get their lips pierced, wear too skinny t-shirts, present themselves darker than Marilyn Manson and as cute as Micky Maus” (Lachenmann 2007; translated by the author).

⁹ An example is the injury using knives happening at a ritual of the healing of the obsessed in Nigeria (Vogels 2003).

¹⁰ Some of the myths show that body marks are supposed to protect one from bad spirits etc. (Kasten 2006: 25).

¹¹ Different from the medical scarification that was practiced until the 19th century “where a vast number of small slices were made by cutting tools with the intention to divert contagious matter off the skin or drench medication” (Prinz o.J.: 9; translated by the author).

main function”¹² (Anzieu 1991: 128), which means that the skin fulfils a central function in the development of one’s self.

Therefore skin scars in western culture – compared to e.g. Pacific or African cultures – are normally not seen as symbols of high status (especially when there exists no term for adornment scars in western culture). Up until the modern era body signs represented the practices of negative social sanctioning (e.g. the stigmatization of thieves) and consequently were visible indicators of dissonant behavior or rather a sign of social stigmatization. Scarring of the so called “duelling scar”, which was a visible sign of their belonging to a fighting (fencing) fraternity group, make an exception.¹³

By now the body has also become an object of self-design in western civilization (Bette 2005). Within the frame of self-design and identity work we can notice an increase of injury practices as Tattoos and Piercings that progressively meet social acceptance or at least tolerance. Simultaneously, in the 20th century the ideal of an unharmed skin, the “flawlessness of the epidermis”¹⁴ dominates (Benthien 2001: 54). As a result, the skin on the one hand advances as an organ of composition, on the other hand the invulnerability and “purity” of the skin that has been democratized in the course of the 20th century is still existent. This is why the acceptance and tolerance for body modifications in our society is only marginally given: scars have a distinct lower social acceptance and are seen as signs of a subcultural membership or as a sign of accidents, diseases or physical problems.

3. Empirical approach

If one looks at the communication and staging of self-injurious behavior on the internet, the results are inconsistent. One way to explain this lies in the fact that the internet can be described as a hybrid medium or conglomerate of different services or applications that offers its users a lot of different possibilities to communicate or interact. Several spaces can be differentiated that enable synchronous (e.g. chats) or asynchronous (e.g. mails)

¹² Translated by the author.

¹³ Thereby a gender-specific difference has to be mentioned: an empirical test showed that men with non-deforming scars were more positive evaluated for short-term relationships by women than men without any scars; men however never evaluated scarified women positively (Burriss et al. 2009).

¹⁴ Translated by the author.

communication, or even mass (personal homepage), group (chat) or individual (email) communication. Moreover, the net's services or applications can be distinguished concerning their channel variety: spaces have been found that only enable textual exchange (MUD, chat), others support audio visual communication (YouTube), then there are some services which allow a multi media staging (homepages) (for more information see Thurlow et al. 2008; Misoch 2006).

3.1 The analyzed virtual spaces

The present study has an explorative character and the goal to analyze the image communication or rather visual staging of self-injurious behavior on the internet. The following virtual spaces were examined: (1) YouTube, (2) social network sites (using the example of facebook) and (3) personal homepages. The stated spaces are differently structured and were selected because they all offer its users the opportunity of self-presentation and visual communication. Another reason to concentrate on these media is the fact that social network sites and YouTube belong to the so-called Web 2.0 applications that focus on media products which are user generated – „which aim to facilitate creativity, collaboration, and sharing among users“ (Cheng et al.2008) – and that are most of all used intensively by adolescents¹⁵ (see MPFS 2009: 28). The analysis of the visual staging of self-injurious behavior on these different platforms was empirically based on the search strategy using keywords. The used keywords were “cutting”, “self-injurious-behavior” or “self-injury” (sampling in German). The results found by using these keywords, foremost the visual images, were then analyzed. The sampling was undertaken from January 2010, 15 – 31, and June 2010, 21– 26.

The focus of this analysis is the visual presentation of the phenomenon self-injury. Visual material is used and “pictures play a major part for the juvenile perception, reality experience and communication of today”¹⁶ (Marotzki/Niesyto 2006: 7). Moreover, the audio-visual communication of topics or rather the audiovisual self-presentation seems to become more and more important (for adolescents) (e.g. Richard 2010). Additionally, images

¹⁵ This fact is substantial as self-injurious behavior often appears with adolescents and therefore is seen as a juvenile symptom.

¹⁶ Translated by the author.

are especially suitable to transfer physical signs into cyberspace and to communicate emotions. The latter is of special interest as self-injurious behavior is a highly emotional area. Therefore, the following exemplarily analysis is based on the paradigm that the aesthetic experience of image reception predominantly lies in the communication of emotions (Fuhs 2006: 219).

3.2 Analysis criteria: authenticity

To interpret the visual material, first of all the criteria of the interpretation have to be determined. In this case, a special interest was laid on whether the presented visual material could be interpreted to be authentic or if it were images taken from the internet. It is assumed that the latter is done with the goal to communicate the emotions of the presenter but don't really show wounds of the presenter him-/herself. Images (photos) of self-injurious behavior were interpreted as authentic by the following criteria:

- 1) Close-ups were presented (shot compositions see Korte 2004: 27f.) that show the wounds and affected body parts (e.g. forearm). This method can be used for different reasons: For starters, this perspective can be used when people take photographs of them self. It is easier to take a picture of the concerned body parts than to try a full body picture with the help of the camera's self-timer or by the help of other people. In addition, only showing details makes the photographed individual anonymous as the exclusive showing of the affected body parts prevents any conclusion about the presented person.
- 2) The photographs were categorized as unprofessional and non-aesthetized. The photographs were self-made, often showing the same motives, and were formally similarly organized.
- 3) The pictures don't draw any conclusion about the presenting individual, his or her sex, age etc.
- 4) The scenery was always private. The photographs were all taken indoors and showed the affected body parts – in the most cases the forearm – on an underlayment (leg, desk, sofa).

- 5) Only images which occurred once within the sample (and which were not used on several personal homepages or in several videos) were epistemologically defined as authentic and therefore belonging to the presenting individual.

4. Presenting self-injurious behavior on the net

4.1 Self-injurious behavior on YouTube

YouTube can be described as a video platform that allows its users to watch videos and upload their own video productions. Besides these aspects, it offers the possibility to judge and comment the videos published on YouTube. It is therefore seen as an application that belongs to the web 2.0, although not all of the videos are user-generated. To upload a video it is necessary to register with a username and password: Thus, YouTube is based on the principle of a pseudonymity. Besides the possibility to watch and upload a video, which can either be publicly accessed or only by a limited group, there is the possibility to be connected to others by sharing videos with other users: „share certain kinds of videos with one set of friends, while making and sharing other videos with a different set of friends“ (Lange 2007). Via this process of “sharing” relationships and networks can actively be shown on YouTube. A keyword research concerning self-injurious behavior demonstrates that this topic is intensively discussed. Focusing on those videos that are personal self-presentations (and not thematic videos) and which therefore have an (quasi) authentic character¹⁷, it becomes clear that these videos are often produced with the goal to make the symptom comprehensible for others: “As I have experienced life with cutting myself, I would like to help others who cannot understand the sense of it, to open their eyes (...). With the help of my friend I produced this video”¹⁸. The images, produced by the users themselves, fulfil a communicative function, particularly because several studies have shown that YouTube’s users “first of all [produce] images to communicate”¹⁹ (Richard 2010: 56).

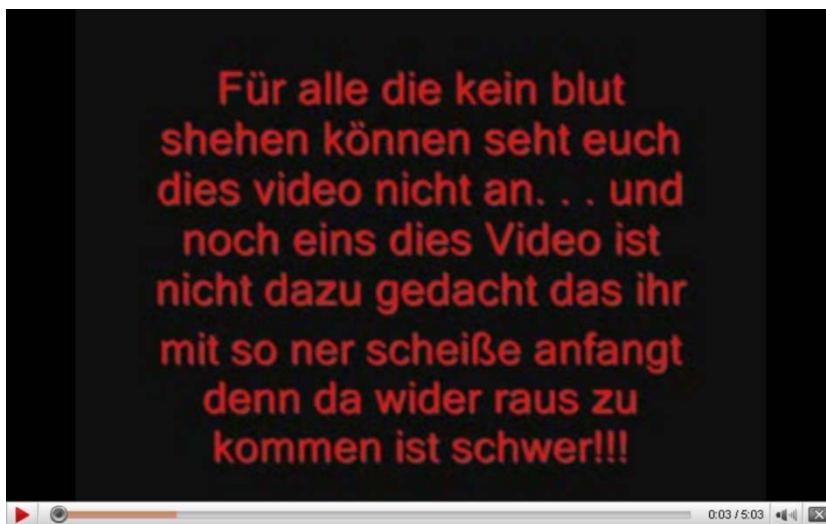
¹⁷ It became apparent that „...the idea of authenticity concerning the usage of YouTube became an important category“ (Näser 2008; translated by the author).

¹⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvv6TOg1igs> (18.01.2010); translated by the author of this paper.

¹⁹ Translated by the author.

The videos concerning self-injurious behavior published on YouTube show the emotions mostly in a textual and figurative way and show the motivational background which led to the self-injurious behavior. These audiovisual documents can be assigned to the genre of „digital storytelling“ (Davis 2004; Lambert 2007) which is defined as: „the art of creating a short movie based on a meaningful personal narrative“ (Snelson/Sheffield 2009: 159). The dramaturgical structure of the videos, that last from two to six minutes, often shows similarities: it starts with introducing words and warnings before watching the video, followed by the portrayal of the subjective affectivity via texts and pictures (photographs), possibly a hint to whom the video is addressed or an appeal that self-injurious behavior cannot be seen as a way to solve problems.

Figure 2: Textual portray of self-injurious behavior on YouTube



Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dB4aFYeGnt4> (03.08.2010)²⁰

The visual material used in the videos was interestingly less figurative but textual (see figure 2). Moreover, it seems striking that for the most part texts (e.g. poems) were used beyond a figurative background²¹ or stylized wounds or bloody razor blades were shown (see figure 3) than image material that presented the affected person. In respect of the presented image

²⁰ "To those of you who can't stand to see blood, don't watch this video....and another thing: this video is not intended to encourage you to start such a shit because it is really hard to get out of it, again." (translated by the author of this paper)

²¹ In the style of: „A scream says more than a thousand words, a tear says more than a thousand screams, a cut says more than a thousand tears (from : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dB4aFYeGnt4>; 20.01.2010; translated by the author).

material, it can be stated that authentic biographical material²² was only rarely published on YouTube²³, whereas the term authenticity in this context means that the image material shows the user him- or herself. Additionally, the portrayals are musically accompanied, whereby “Narben” by Subway to Sally or „Rasierklingenliebe“ by Caspar, both songs which address self-injurious behavior, seem to be favored. If authentic, in other words biographical image material is shown, this follows a special pattern: the presented self-injured wounds or scars are shown in a way that the presenting individual cannot be identified by only revealing the affected body parts (see figure 4).

Figure 3: De-personalized und aestheticized portrayal of self-injurious-behavior on YouTube



(Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dB4aFYeGnt4> (03.08.2010))

²² The concerned text presents an exemplarily analysis, not a study with quantifiable declarations

²³ To learn more about the definition of the term authenticity concerning the presented image material, see Chapter 2.2.

Figure 4: De-personalized portrayal of self-injurious behavior on YouTube



(Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzCB1cPyMeY> (03.08.2010))

4.2 Self-injurious behavior on social network sites

“We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.” (Boyd/Ellison 2007). Social network sites are web-based applications that primarily offer their users to set up and foster social networks (Ellison et al. 2007) and to visualize friendship networks (Lange 2007). The registration works via a user name: that can be a pseudonym or one’s real name; research has shown that people mostly use their real names, which is understandable because in this particular friendship network users normally know each other in real life²⁴. Social network sites offer their users the following possibilities (which can vary depending on the provider): Self presentation on their profile page (that works as the starter page of one’s on domain), the creation of a friends list and an address book as well as their administration, messaging, chat or blog functions, the foundation of groups and their joining and the usage of different search functions within the

²⁴ This was, for example, confirmed in a not published explorative study by the author about the usage of social network sites by students (http://www.unilu.ch/deu/studie-studivz---sl_333195.html)

network system. The particular areas can be accessed publicly or only by a defined social circle.

The two main social network sites' characteristics are that they are 1) not anonymous and 2) strongly interconnected. Social network sites enjoy great popularity with adolescents and post-adolescents, although the data on this strongly varies: it is assumed that the distribution lies between ca. 55% concerning adolescents from 12 to 17 years in the USA (Lenhardt/Madden 2007), 51% concerning adolescents from 18 to 24 year (Bumgarner 2007) up to 90% of the American students (undergraduate students; Stutzman 2006). Even though the data differs, it still illustrates that social networks sites bear a central meaning to the adolescents' everyday's life. The research on facebook²⁵ concerning the communication and staging of self-injurious behavior shows surprisingly at first sight that the keyword search²⁶ barely reveals results. There are only a few groups on facebook²⁷ that deal with this issue. The ones existing resemble self-help groups and offer the possibility of a textual exchange between affected people and their relatives. There was only one image of self-injurious behavior that was found within the samplings's timeframe: Even though this image was not identifiable it was considered as being not authentic, because this image was found on other internet pages. This presentation wasn't published within the frame of dealing with self-injurious behavior but in the context of a group about "scars". Within the research's timeframe there were no references of self-injurious behavior nor was respective visual material found on the publicly accessible profiles on facebook.

Figure 5: De-personalized portrayal of self-injurious behavior on facebook



(Group „Narben“(scars) on facebook (not existing anymore, 08/03/2010)

²⁵ The basis of the research build only those profiles on facebook which can publicly be accessed

²⁶ Keywords: cutting, self-injurious behavior, self-injury

²⁷ Group functions constituted the exemplarily exam room. For 95% of the facebook users group memberships belong to their social network activities (Zhao et al. 2008: 1827).

This low hit rate, compared to the research results on YouTube, shows that self-injurious behavior doesn't seem to be an issue that is discussed on social network sites, at least not in the publicly accessible area.

4.3 Self-injurious behavior on personal homepages

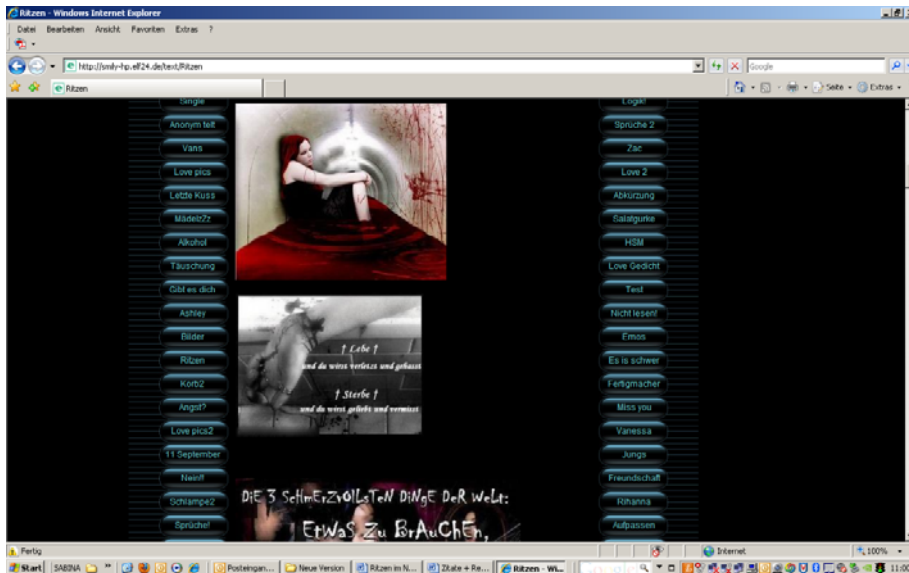
Personal homepages are web sites that are dedicated to the portrayal of certain issues or to personal self-presentation. Personal homepages have a special format: they build hybrid spaces that enable mass, group as well as individual communication by synchronous/asynchronous communication services and applications. A homepage can contain an email service, a chat, a guestbook function etc. – the crucial channel however for the personal self-presentation is the website. It is important to note that the communication on the website is always unidirectional (1 x n), and that the medium is, structurally speaking, a pull medium (and therefore asynchronous) which contents can be textual, auditory, visual or audiovisual. Personal homepages partially provide very detailed and sensitive information about individuals. Different studies made clear that personal homepages on the one hand are perceived as firm media for personal self-portrayal (e.g. Misoch 2004), and on the other hand that the personal portrayals ensued on these sites almost exclusively happen with an authentic intention (80 – 90%, see Misoch 2004; Buten 1996).

Personal homepages are not anonymous and in most cases neither pseudonymous. Individual homepages provide information about names and last names, residences, ages, family status', hobbies, friends etc. But if one contemplates personal homepages that deal with self-injurious behavior, things look very different: in this case the identity seems rather masked as only the individual's name or nick name is given. The possibility to identify the author is thereby not completely barred (most of all via the registration on the homepage) but at least aggravated.

The research showed that themes like self-injurious behavior and cutting are relatively often staged on personal homepages. Normally this phenomenon is presented within the scope of personal self-presentation. Looking at the forms of expression, self-injurious behavior is primarily staged with texts as biographical texts or poems that belong to the topic of self-injurious behavior and psychical distress. Stylized pictures that mark the image communication on YouTube (see figure 7) were also found. Besides these stylized pictures

that are used for visual communication of inner conflicts, there was also image material (photographs) found that is considered authentic.

Figure 7: Stylized Portrayals of self-injurious-behavior on personal homepages



(Source: <http://smily-hp.elf24.de/text/Ritze n> (03.08.2010))

Figure 8: Authentic image material of self-injurious-behavior on personal homepages



(Source: http://destroyer.12see.de/svv_48363347.html (03.08.2010))

5. The portrayal of self-injurious behavior: a media theoretical perspective

5.1 Social network sites, YouTube and websites: media theoretical analysis

Comparing the visual staging of self-injurious-behavior on YouTube, social network sites and personal homepages, the different styles of portrayals can be explained media theoretically. The most striking result the research showed was the low presence of this topic as well as the absence of visual authentic images within social network sites (facebook) and in contrast the frequent communication and presentation of self-injurious behavior on YouTube or personal homepages, partly via authentic photographs.

a) Social network sites

The analysis of these results against the background of their media characteristics shows that social network sites have a very low degree of anonymity. This has to do with the fact that these networks are used by people who, for the most part, know each other in real life and foster their contacts via social network sites. If we assume that self-presentation on the net offers opportunities for experiments, we can see that this is rather limited on social network sites: the identity cannot really be constructed differently from how the individuals present themselves in real life. As the users mostly know each other from RL and because the social network sites are strongly interconnected, there is no surprise that the presented individuals correspond to their real life presentation and that the sites for most part are designed non-anonymous. The relationships within this virtual network can principally be described as „anchored relationships“ (Zhao et al. 2008: 1818). This means that the medium social network site supports the *communication of socially desirable identities* because of its media characteristics. Thus, it is not used for the process of self-disclosure or the staging of „hidden selves“ (Suler 2002). The undertaken self-portrayal via social network site is therefore not exclusively authentic but selective in the sense that, for instance, especially positive photographs (e.g. online dating sites: „to stretch the truth a bit“ (Yurchisin et al. 2005: 742)) are presented whereas socially undesirable characteristics (e.g. cutting) are

rather hidden or concealed within the medium's frame. This explains why social network sites aren't used to show self-injurious behavior²⁸

b) YouTube

In contrast to social network sites, both YouTube and personal homepages demonstrated that self-injurious behavior belongs to the topics which are dealt with. In this context there was found stylized non-authentic image material as well as authentic photos.

Regarding the audiovisual productions on the video platform YouTube – concerning the media format video – it becomes clear that self-injurious behavior is presented via audiovisual products that don't show moving pictures. The presented videos mainly consist in a collage of photos and text elements. They can only be classified as a video in the sense that the images/texts have background music and insofar are audiovisual media products. Even though the presentation of image material in an aesthetic and stylized way dominates, there were also photos found that seem to be autobiographic and authentic.

If we look at these presentations on YouTube assumed to be authentic, it becomes clear that they can be supported as the platform YouTube enables a presentation via using a pseudonym (nick). As a result the presented videos about self-injurious behavior stay anonymous for the recipient. One's personal protection takes place in two steps: by creating a pseudonym and by the de-individualizing portrayal of the body's injuries (in the case biographic material was used).

c) Personal homepages

In comparison to YouTube, the communication of self-injurious behavior is differently realized on personal homepages. Due to the media format, textual portrayals predominate. Text elements and poems are presented that – more or less biographical – deal with inner pain or self-injurious behavior. The image material indeed is similar to the visual material presented on YouTube, nevertheless there were also images found on personal homepages that could be seen as authentic biographical (see figure 8).

This finding is surprising because personal homepages, as earlier stated, offer the lowest degree of anonymity in comparison with YouTube and social network sites. In the course of

²⁸ This finding is consistent with the results of empirical studies concerning the use of social network sites: these studies have shown that the users of social network sites mainly present highly socially desirable identities (Zhao et al. 2008; Lampe et al. 2006).

the present sampling it became clear that the individual's indications on homepages that deal with self-injurious behavior were significantly less detailed in contrast to other homepages. As the issue self-injury is mostly dealt with within the range of other topics, one nonetheless gets information about the presenting person, their interests and friendships. In most cases the name or a nickname is indicated, as well as age and in some cases the individual's residence: by giving only selective information the individuals try to mask their identity.

5.2 Self-disclosure or group communication?

Self-injurious behavior can, as shown in chapter 2.2, fulfil different functions: to decrease tension or rather to regulate emotions, to cope with burdensome incidents, to communicate or express group memberships. Against this background, the presented authentic image material and therefore the public presentation of wounds on YouTube or personal homepages can be explained by using two different models:

- On the one hand, this could be seen as a process of self-disclosure supported by the media's characteristics, in which's course one's own self-injury – also by using photos – is presented;
- On the other hand, this could be seen as in-group communication that is realized within this special virtual space using authentic images.

a) The process of self-disclosure

Self-disclosure describes the process of disclosing personal and intimate information, this means „the act of revealing personal information to others“ (Archer 1980: 183). Self-disclosure only concerns one's own information and is related to both quality and quantity of the information. Several empirical studies have shown that the willingness to self-disclosure is significantly higher in the context of computer mediated communication than in face-to-face-settings (Weisband/Kiesler 1996; Joinson 2001). Factors that support the process of self-disclosure in computer mediated communication are:

(1) Anonymity: it was empirically shown that there was an obvious coherence between anonymity or rather visual anonymity of users and their willingness to self-disclosure (Joinson 2001:2). „Under the cloak of anonymity users can express the way they truly feel and think“(McKenna/Bargh 1998: 62). This effect doesn't only appear online but could also be seen in real life, e.g. when confessing or talking to a crisis line.

(2) A low social presence: Social presence (Short et al. 1976) is defined as „the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction“(ebd.: 64). Transferring this concept to computer mediated communication it is assumed that online communication has a very low degree of social presence. The ideal of communication is seen in the face-to-face-interaction, where due to physical presence and the sensual observableness of the other actors we find the highest degree of social presence.²⁹

(3) The increased private self-awareness: An individual can either draw his or her attention outwards or inwards, meaning to him- or herself (Duval/Wicklund 1972). If the attention is drawn inwards, one can distinguish between private and public self-awareness. Private self-awareness involves confidential and intimate aspects that are usually not shown (or not likely to be shown) in social situations – public self-awareness involves those aspects that are openly presented in social contexts and which are part of the social identity: „[...] private self-consciousness [...] was concerned with attending to one's inner thoughts and feelings [...]“ (Fenigstein et al. 1975: 523). Several studies have shown that computer mediated communication enhances private self-awareness through the user's physical isolation in front of his or her screen (Matheson/Zanna 1988).

Contemplating YouTube videos and personal homepages against this background, it becomes clear that all the named factors are effective: (1) Videos and homepages that address self-injurious behavior and thereby present authentic image material show a lower degree of identification. This was most of all discovered for personal homepages: sites that dealt with self-injurious behavior were often held more anonymously or pseudonymously

²⁹ The concept of „social presence“ is a matter of debate, most of all because new studies have shown that computer mediated communication can show a high degree of social presence. Meanwhile, it has become a main focus to create virtual spaces in the way to increase social presence (z.B. Lee/Nass 2003).

than it is the case with “ordinary” personal homepages. (2) Because of the low degree of interconnection and interactivity³⁰ homepages (and for some part also YouTube) have a lower degree of social presence and therefore constitute a setting that (3) increases the private self-awareness for the presenting individual.

Due to those structural conditions a homepage can be the ideal medium in order to present parts of one’s identity that normally cannot be shown, especially because a survey showed that owner of a homepage stated that they could be more authentic or rather open on their homepages than in real life (Misoch 2004: 177ff.). The decidedly and relentlessly presentation of wounds can therefore be seen as a form of self-disclosure that is acted out through the medium personal homepage – as personal homepages don’t harbor any risks, recriminations or other negative social sanctioning because of their low interactivity.

Concerning the portrayals on YouTube, it was demonstrated that they provide the conditions that could lead to an increased process of self-disclose – but YouTube is also a social network. In that way self-disclosures can take place. Starting from the presented videos, a communication can be evoked that deals with the topic self-injury and that is protected via pseudonymity.

b) Group communication

Research has shown that self-injurious behavior can fulfil communicative functions (Petermann/Winkel 2009: 69). In consideration of the increasing prevalence of self-injurious behavior, most of all among feminine adolescents, it can be assumed that self-injury can be seen as a special form of juvenile trouble-shooting or communication attempt. It becomes clear that – among particular youth cultures such as the Emo sub-culture – it seems absolutely normal for some adolescents to express their attitude to life (desperation, grief) via deliberate self-injury. That also applies for some adolescents that do not belong to such a special youth culture: “It really annoys me that more and more young girls make a lark out of it (yes, it is true, with their brainless fashion-cutting they prevent that attention is drawn to real personality disorder or severe self-injury) and have to show their wounds to everybody (I only say t-shirts in winter or “oh, look, I got a new cut”). One of my friends has also

³⁰ A study showed that the possibilities of synchron communication are used on homepages which display a very low degree of interactivity (Misoch 2004: 163f.).

currently started it, she continuously sends me those bloody ugly photographs and sad poems”³¹

A group in the sociological sense is defined as a group of members who team up and are in touch over a longer period of time in order to accomplish a joint goal (Gukenbiehl/Schäfers 2003: 118). In the course of their membership processes of identification take place. Group memberships (the so called “peer groups”) have a special meaning for adolescents as they fulfil the primary function for process of separation (from the parents) and demarcation. The group membership has a central personal and emotional meaning to the young people and is important for their identity. Groups can build their own forms of clothing, habitus’, language, music or body handling that determine the group membership (in-group) and function as social distinction.

Regarding the visual portrayals of authentic image material on YouTube or personal homepages against this background, they can be seen as a special form of communication: (1) On the one hand, a communication with the members of the in-group. The presentation of one’s own wounds fulfills the function of communicating their group membership (boundaries) by publishing visual signs of group membership within the net community. (2) On the other hand, it can be seen as a clear demarcation towards out-groups. The visual presentation of wounds fulfils in this case the goal of social distinction.

6. Conclusions

Self-injurious behavior demonstrates how the body becomes a means of communication. When one’s own body and skin are used for communicative or self-publicizing purposes by piercing or tattooing oneself, this happens in a more subtle way and less deliberate and controlled in the case of self-injury: This text is written under the skin and is not meant to be seen from the public. It becomes clear that this phenomenon usually is acted out secretly as its consequences (wounds, scars) are hidden through stigma-management (Goffman). If the wounds are presented publicly, as shown in the examples of this paper, a transition from the inside to the outside takes place: private matters are made publicly accessible.

³¹ Extract from a Forum: http://forum.gofeminin.de/forum/carriere1/___f4866_carriere1-Emoritzenbeifreundin.html. (translated by the author).

The (postmodern) contemporary society can be characterized by the increasing tendency to mediatize private matters and therefore a transition of private matters up to the public sphere is noticed (see Imhof/Schulz 1998; Thimm 2004). Against this background, the portrayals of self-injury that were found on the net could be seen as an example for this tendency to publish private matters in public. From a media and communication studies' perspective this phenomenon could also be interpreted in the sense that the media's characteristics are likely to support or inhibit this behavior.

The analysis of the visual material showed that self-injurious behavior is only barely addressed in non-anonymous or strongly connected (networked) spaces. Whereas this topic is often dealt with in spaces that allow a masking of one's identity it became clear that personal homepages that present authentic images concerning self-injury were not identifiable. The same goes for video productions on YouTube that were uploaded using a pseudonym. As a result, the presentation of biographic visual material of self-injurious behavior seems to be connected with the possibility of hiding one's identity (the possibility of a pseudonymity) as well as with processes of social identities and group identification, and the media characteristics themselves.

These patterns of the media's frame – the anonymity of the communication situation, a low social presence and therefore an increased private self-awareness – can lead to self-disclosure. In the course of such a process, sensitive and private contents are disclosed, e.g. the public presentation of self-injury and one's own wounds and scars. This can be interpreted as the portrayal of the hidden self (Suler 2002), as the presentation of the part of one's self that the affected people try to hide in a real life context. Moreover, the presentation of photos of self-injurious behavior can fulfil the function of social distinction and in-group communication.

The example of the communication and portrayal of self-injurious behavior illustrates in exemplary way the media effects: the tendency that social identities are realized or completed within the virtual spaces, the process of self-disclosure (in the course of anonymous and pseudonymous communication) that is supported by the media and the blur of traditional limits between private and public matters and the increasing publication of private contents.

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